

WILLIAM G. CHANTER

A

Guide for Bible Readers



A GUIDE FOR BIBLE READERS

Edited by Harris Franklin Rall

THE PROPHETS



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THE OLD TESTAMENT

I. THE BOOKS OF THE LAW

II. THE BOOKS OF HISTORY

III. THE PROPHETS

IV. POETRY AND WISDOM

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THE NEW TESTAMENT

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John Knox

1506

THE PROPHETS

WILLIAM G. CHANTER



WITHDRAWN



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EDITOR'S PREFACE

THIS volume is intended to help the reader who wishes to know the Bible at first hand. The way to know a country is to visit it and travel through it, not just to read about it. But a good guide can help. He can lead to places of greatest interest and can give information needed for understanding what is seen. The Bible is a great and wonderful country. It is not one book but many books-books in which many voices join, and whose story stretches through many centuries. Its writings differ widely in character, as do the mountains and valleys, the rivers and seacoasts, the cities and plains, of a wide country like ours. At the same time, they have a real unity. They have one source, the Spirit of God moving upon the hearts of men. They have a living center, Jesus of Nazareth. We call the Bible the Word of God, and with good reason, for it comes out of the word which God spoke to these writers "by divers portions and in divers manners," and through it God speaks to us today.

All of us know some parts of the Bible quite well—a chapter here, a verse there, certain psalms learned perhaps in childhood, and some parts of the New Testament. But we all need wider acquaintance with the Bible, and truer understanding and larger appreciation of its wealth of

moral and spiritual meaning.

This book is one of eight Guides planned for the purpose of leading to this broader knowledge. The authors have

been chosen because of their training in Bible study and their experience in teaching. Four of the books are given to the Old Testament, four to the New. Many of the less important parts of the Bible have of necessity been omitted. The Guides go with the reader on his journey through these writings. They stimulate interest and understanding. They introduce the writer and indicate the time, place, purpose, and special character of the writing. Chapter by chapter, they help the student to discover the meanings and values in the Bible, especially for the personal religious life. Since these Guides will be used largely by ministers, attention is given to material for sermons; but the lay reader will find them equally helpful. Each book is intended to serve for a six months' period. Four or five Readings should be completed each week.

Here are some rules for Bible reading whose observance

will pay rich dividends:

1. Read with a definite purpose and expectation: to understand what is written; to gain quickening of thought and enlargement of mind and vision; to get personal help for good living; and, above all, to meet God and to hear his voice. These are great ends; whether they are reached will rest with each student.

2. Bring all that you have to your reading. What you get will depend on what you bring. Especially, bring a sympathetic imagination. You will not be reading dead words. They came out of life. Try to enter into that life of the past: into the faith of a psalmist and his trials and hopes, the appeal of a prophet speaking to a nation, the witness of Paul, the full heart of the Evangelists. Occasional reading aloud will help make the words live. Bring also an attentive and inquiring mind. Read slowly, pause, reflect, always seeking the real meaning.

3. Read in the spirit of prayer. Offer a prayer as you begin. Ask for the light which God's Spirit can give. Lift up

your heart to God and ask God to come to you.

4. Read in the spirit of obedience. Ask what the passage means for your own life and pray for grace to follow what is thus revealed. "Apply thyself wholly to the Bible; apply

the Bible wholly to thyself." (Bengel.)

In this course are frequent references to ABC, which means The Abingdon Bible Commentary, a commentary on the Old and New Testaments which contains many interesting articles on the Bible as a whole as well as an article on each book of the Bible. The purchase of this book is recommended to the lay reader, who will find it most interesting and helpful. For the minister who is studying these Guides it is indispensable.

The student will find that keeping a notebook from day

to day as he reads will prove of great value.

HARRIS FRANKLIN RALL

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FOREWORD

NOT all of the Hebrew prophets left written records of their teaching. It was not until the eighth century B.C. that some of them began to put their sermons into writing. These writings, collected and edited by various hands, make up the prophetic books of our Bible. They are among the most important religious documents in all human history. Jesus himself read them with loving attention. As he fed his mind upon them, he grew in wisdom and in favor with God. Can we do better than to follow his example?

If, however, we are to read these books intelligently, it is necessary that we have in mind a clear idea of what a Hebrew prophet was like. The Abingdon Bible Commentary (hereafter referred to as ABC) contains an article on "The Prophetic Literature of the Old Testament," pp. 150-53. This may well be read, as also may sec. 2 of the article "The Religion of Israel," pp. 167-69. Those who would like to go further into the subject are referred to A. C. Knudson, The Beacon Lights of Prophecy, ch. i; G. A. Smith, The Book of the Twelve Prophets, Vol. I, chs. i-iii; and W. Robertson Smith, The Prophets of Israel, lectures i-ii.

There is room here for only a brief statement of some of the main points which must be kept in mind in our reading. First of all, the Hebrew prophet was primarily a preacher. It is true that in the course of his preaching he often made predictions of what was about to happen to his nation. Sometimes these took the form of promises of great out-

pourings of divine favor. More often they were solemn warnings of disaster to be visited upon the nation as punishment for its misdoings. But foretelling the future was only a by-product of the prophet's main work. A modern preacher might tell his congregation that unless America takes her full share of responsibility for the welfare of the world she will suffer dearly for her selfishness. He might even point out the way in which this suffering will come to pass. That would be like most of the predictions of the ancient prophets of Israel. Prediction, then, was not the main work of the prophet.

The second thing to remember is that the prophets were preachers to their own time. It must not be thought that their predictions referred to events so far in the future that they are still to come, so that they offer us a guide to the outcome of our own current history. To be sure, since they spoke from the exalted experience of a clear vision of God it follows that they held up ideals which have an eternal meaning, which could not have their complete realization easily or soon. But they held them up as the basis for present hope and present action, not as visions of a distant future which no man then living could ever expect to see. No preacher of today would be much good if he spent his precious sermon time in speculating what was to happen in the year 2500. Yet he would not be much good, either, if he dealt only with the local or national or international affairs of the present. We expect him to deal also with principles which stand true for the most distant future as well as for the present day. It is the high degree to which they combined eternal and heavenly principle with temporal and practical wisdom that gives the prophets of Israel supreme greatness among religious teachers. Their heads were in the heavenly places, but their feet were on the ground. Their writings are to be scanned not for detailed clues to the outcome of events which are taking place before

FOREWORD

our eyes but as an expression of the basic ideals of truly high religion. In those ideals the prophets found, for us as well as for their own people, the key to a profound understanding of all human history; but they were not writing in advance the history of our modern time.

One more thing must be kept in mind: the prophets were preachers, but they were preachers of a peculiar quality. They saw the things they preached about as clearly as they ever saw hill or valley. They heard the voice of God as clearly as they ever heard any human voice. When, for example, Amos says, "I saw the Lord standing beside the atar" (9:1), he is not merely using a figure of speech; he actually did see the awful Presence of God with the eyes of his soul-a vision much more real than anything he had ever seen with his ordinary eyesight. When he savs, "The Lord said unto me" (7:8), he is telling of an actual voice which spoke more loudly in in his ears than the voice of any man could speak-a voice which had the heart-stirring reality of the lion's roar. This peculiar intensity of heart and mind made the prophet a man of power. It gave to his preaching a kind of flaming vividness; his was indeed a tongue of fire. It made him able to stand alone in unwavering conviction and unflinching courage against an unbelieving and often bitterly hostile world. He was closely and delicately attuned to God; he knew that he was called and empowered by him. What more could be need?

We begin, then, our reading of the prophetic books by taking them as the work of great and truly inspired preachers of religion, between whom and the eternal world the veil was very thin. What they saw through that veil is of the most imperative importance to us. We read their writings that we may share their vision.

Since these manuals will be used by many who are pursuing the Conference courses of study for ministers, assign-

ments for "Written Work" appear at intervals. However, these exercises should be regarded not simply as directions for study but as opportunities to express what you have gathered for yourself from your reading.

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AMOS

IN many ways Amos is typical of the great prophets of Israel. Furthermore, he was the first of them to leave his message in writing. For these two reasons a systematic reading of the prophetic literature may well begin with his book.

Of course you cannot thoroughly understand any prophetic book unless you know something about the prophet whose message is there recorded. How was he led to take up the prophetic ministry? To whom did he speak, and under what circumstances? For a summary of what is known about such matters the Commentaries should be consulted. In the case of Amos there is a discussion of these points in ABC, pp. 775-76.

Against one thing you should always be on your guard. You must not allow yourself to think that the people to whom the prophets spoke were quite unlike the men and women of our day, or that the conditions in which they worked had no resemblance to those in which we live. It is easy to slip into this way of thinking. In the first place, we are dealing, when we read the prophets, with ancient history, and there is always something misleading about that phrase "ancient history." It seems to tell us that the story has as little to do with our times as the fossil remains of prehistoric animals have to do with the use and care of our own domestic herds. But there is another thing which is likely to lead us astray. The prophets and their people were Orientals, and we are inclined to think that East and

West are so far apart that the problems of the East, especially the problems of the ancient East, cannot at all resemble the problems of modern Western civilization just as long and just so far as we let ourselves slip into these ways of thinking, the prophets and their words will seem unreal to us. They will have only the curious interest of faint and far-off echoes of outworn messages and alien voices.

Now the truth is that human nature has not changed in any of its essentials since the time of the prophets. Nor is the Oriental made of some stuff different from that of which we are made. It is true that Amos was dealing with people who spoke a tongue which is now what we call a dead language. Their manners and customs were different from ours. But these differences, after all, are on the surface. The men and women of that ancient time and of those distant regions were ruled by the same motives which govern us, were moved by the same feelings, knew the same jovs and sorrows, struggled with the same temptations. The weaknesses of human nature which beset them are still with us, and are producing conditions which underneath their modern dress are the very same as those against which Amos thundered. His message is a message to us because it was a message not merely to ancient Israelites but to human beings the message of a man who saw beneath the surface of life saw down to its basic essentials.

Furthermore, Amos claimed to be looking at his world in the light of a vision of God, to be judging it by the unchanging laws of the Eternal. If his claims were valid, if he was indeed a true prophet of God, then to the facts of an unchanging human nature he was applying the unchangeable principles of the God who everywhere and always rules human life. For nearly three thousand years the claims of Amos have met with no effective challenge. Now he who speaks for the Eternal is always speaking to the present and is always speaking with authority. We should read the message of Amos in an expectant search for that

divine truth which not only informs the minds of men but strengthens their hearts to meet the challenges of their own day.

Reading 1: Amos 7:10-17

PROPHET AND PRIEST

This is the only part of the book which tells of a definite event in the life of Amos. It may well be read as an introduction to the book. It is a dramatic situation which is here set before us, and you should use your imagination to draw as vivid a picture of the scene as you can. Think of the contrast in appearance between the stately figure of the archpriest of the great national sanctuary (v. 13) and the rough herdsman of Tekoa (v. 14) Think also of their relative standing and importance in the eyes of the people of their time. There is tragedy here, for the contrast between them in outward appearance is no sharper than the difference between their inner lives; but in their inner lives the advantage is terribly reversed. Moreover, their real place in the history of the world has nothing to do with the judgment of public opinion of their day. Time has completely reversed the judgment of the moment, and has laid bare the inner realities which then were hidden by outward show. What is the matter with Amaziah and the religion of which he is the chief representative? What makes him look so base and worthless to us as he stands in all his pomp and pride face to face with Amos?

What does this passage tell us about the way in which the defender of orthodoxy in religion and law and order in the nation, received the message of Amos (vv. 10-11)? What does it tell us about the condition at the time of the regularly organized group of prophets (vv 12-14)? It must be remembered that Amaziah is taking Amos as belonging to one of the prophetic guilds, the members of which with the priests, made up the "ministry" of the religion of Israel. But Amos is not in the ministry, nor does he want

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to belong to it. What does he think of the nature and origin of true prophecy (vv 14-15)? What for him is the unpardonable sin (vv. 16-17; see also 2:12)? Would we have done any better than Amaziah had we lived in his time? Could we recognize a real prophet today?

This passage shows us the priest at his worst and the

prophet at his best. What is the contrast?

Reading 2: Amos 1–2 THE JUDGMENTS OF THE LORD

These two chapters are made up of a series of brief statements of the divine judgment on the various nations which were near neighbors of Israel. They come to a climax with a denunciation of God's chosen nation itself. Each of these statements is introduced by the same phrase. We must imagine the prophet appearing at some center of Israel's life, perhaps at Bethel, on a great feast day, speaking uninvited and unannounced in the name of the nation's God.

Note the skill with which the indictment and sentence of Israel is withheld until the last. Amos is speaking to Israelites who are all too ready to rejoice in the divine judgments on their neighbors, whose sins they can see quite clearly. But at the end there comes with a shock to his hearers this terrifying assertion that they, too, must answer to the same great Judge for the sins which they are only too ready to excuse in themselves.

Notice also the kind of transgressions for which the nations are called upon to answer. Are they accused of worshiping false gods, or of offenses against humanity? Are offenses against humanity also sins against God? What does this indicate about Amos's views of the connection of religion (the proper relation of man to God) with morality (the proper relation of man to man)? Today, in theory at least, we take it for granted that the two are inseparable. But was this the accepted view in the time of Amos?

In 2:9-12 there is a reference to Israel's privileged relation

to Jehovah. In what, according to Amos, does the great privilege of Israel consist? What is the Lord's great gift to

his chosen people?

Think, as you end your reading, of the kind of God in whom Amos believes. How great is his power? How widely does his rule extend? What is his relation to Israel? To the world at large? If you find that Amos's idea of God is harsh and severe, remember that he lived about seven hundred and fifty years before Christ. Rome was only three years old. The glory that was Greece was still far in the future. Yet, if the teaching of Amos about God falls short of the N.T. teachings, it nevertheless surpasses in moral grandeur any religious idea that Rome and Greece were able to produce. Can any miracle be greater?

Reading 3: Amos 3

RELIGIOUS PRIVILEGE AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

This chapter is a summary of one of the prophet's sermons Picture to yourself the scene in which the sermon was preached—a crowd of people gathered in some market place or perhaps in the court of one of the great temples, the tense and compelling eloquence of the prophet, the mingled fear and anger of his congregation. In this chapter we have some of the words which Amaziah thought the land was not able to bear.

The sermon begins with a statement of the theme (vv. 1-2). Israel's claim of a specially favored relation to Jehovah is admitted, even asserted. But the prophet draws from this a conclusion which shocks his hearers, for he insists that privilege carries with it responsibility, that the greater the privilege the greater the responsibility. To neglect responsibility is to turn privilege into doom. Since Jehovah is first of all a God of righteousness. Israel's special relation to him and her unique opportunity to know his will makes her wickedness only the greater; therefore her punishment will be the more certain and severe.

The statement of the theme is followed by an assertion of the direct commission of the prophet by God (vv. 3-8). Note the way in which the prophetic call is linked to the general law of cause and effect. There is a natural law in the spiritual world. The God of Amos is not a Being of whim or caprice; he rules by unchanging laws (see also 6:12-13). For the time of Amos this is a remarkable idea. It is the direct opposite of all superstition-think how hard supersition dies. Then in vv. 9-12 the ruling classes are denounced and their ruin is predicted. In this short passage is massed a succession of vivid pictures of national degeneracy. Notice the biting ironv of v. 10: the hoarded treasures of Samaria's palaces are violence and robbery! The things of which Israel's great men boast are things of which they ought to be heartily ashamed; they have won their wealth and power at the expense of their weaker neighbors. What a contrast between utter destruction and Iuxurious self-indulgence is drawn in v. 12! Finally (vv. 13-15) the sanctuary, the home of a religion which does not prevent injustice nor protest against it, and the grand houses of the rich who selfishly abuse their power, are consigned to a common ruin.

The general principle of the inseparable union of obligation with privilege is one which is continually in need of emphasis. It has a special importance for Christian men and women whose privilege is far greater than was that of ancient Israel. Nor is any people blessed with as privileged a place as America. What would Amos have to say to us were he to appear in some great church in America

at Christmas or Easter?

Reading 4: Amos 4 UNHEEDED WARNINGS

The opening passage (vv. 1-3) is an attack on the heedless self-indulgence of the pampered women of the great families of Samaria. These highborn ladies of the royal court are called "cows of Bashan" by the rough-spoken prophet as he pictures them led away into slavery like the animals they are! No doubt these women were beautiful and graceful, but Amos could see nothing beautiful or graceful in people who wanted the satisfaction of their whims without caring how much it cost in terms of human suffering. Note how very modern this situation is. What would Amos have to say to some of the people who make up what is called "high society" today? Or of the people in "lower" stations of life who do their best to imitate those who are richer?

Then follows (vv. 4-5) a biting denunciation of the current worship. The people like it, their priests are kept busy with sacrifice, new forms of worship are added with fussy ingenuity, the tithes are paid regularly and willingly. Yes, says Amos, everybody is pleased—everybody but the God

who is supposed to be worshiped!

The climax of the chapter, however, comes in vv. 6-12. Here is an impressive statement of the impossibility of escaping the divine judgment. There is a limit to God's patience. Israel has refused to heed his repeated warnings, has failed to read the signs of the times, has gone on living in a fool's paradise. And now the dread summons rings out (v. 12b): "Prepare to meet thy God!" The terrible doom of a hardened conscience, dead to the moral realities of the world, is that when finally it does come face to face with God it meets in him an avenging justice.

Reading 5: Amos 5

THE FORM OF GODLINESS WITHOUT THE POWER THEREOF

This is another sermon summary. It begins with a lament for fallen Israel (vv. 1-3) and then goes on to draw a searching contrast between the right and wrong ways of seeking the Lord. The wrong way is to seek him in the temples dedicated by long usage and ancient tradition to his servicel

Ritual and the ceremonies of conventional worship are in vain unless they bring the worshipers face to face with the true God, whose awe-inspiring power, as seen in the marvels of the created world, is matched by the majesty of his even-handed justice (vv. 8-9). But there is no evidence of any contact with God in the people who throng the courts of Israel's temples. Their loudly expressed religious zeal does not make them humble and teachable (v. 10), nor does it make them more just in their dealings with their fellow men (vv. 11-12). It need not be thought that Amos was denouncing ritual as evil in itself. He was denouncing it because it was being made a substitute for the true religion, the fruit of which is moral living, and was thus lulling to rest the conscience of Israel and blinding her eyes to the vision of the true God.

Since Israel is thus substituting forms for the realities of religion, she is doomed (vv. 16-17). The day of the Lord for which the people cry so loudly will be a day of wrath (vv. 18-20). The sermon concludes with a stern assertion of Jehovah's downright hatred of all religious ceremony which is not accompanied by a complete dedication to righteousness (vv. 21-27). The contrast between the false worship of Israel and the true service which God demands (vv. 21-24) is a summary of the message of Amos. It is a statement of the essence of real religion which will never be out of date.

Reading 6: Amos 6

SELFISH LUXURY AND NATIONAL DOOM

This sermon begins with a picture of heedless and vulgar luxury, of people so completely drugged with pleasure and self-indulgence that they cannot read the most obvious signs of the times (vv. 1-6). Worst of all, these people of the so-called upper classes are entirely untouched by the bitter sufferings of the masses of their fellow countrymen. They

are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. They neither know nor care how the other half lives. Here is a condition which exists whenever and wherever there are great extremes of poverty and wealth existing side by side. We are inclinded to accept it as inevitable, if regrettable, and that acceptance is the first step toward ignoring it altogether. To Amos this condition was a monstrous sin against heaven. To accept it was to compound a crime against God.

"Therefore" (v. 7): this is a word used often by Amos, the prophet of the law of cause and effect in the moral world (see 2:14; 3:2; 3:3-8; 4:12; 5:16; 5:27; 6:12; 8:7). With it he begins the second part of his sermon, in which he predicts, as the inevitable result of moral degeneracy, the complete ruin of the nation. The only difference between the palace and the hovel will be in the size of their ruins (v. 11)! The people who build their self-confidence on a defiance of the Ten Commandments are mad (vv. 12-13).

Remember that Amos was preaching at a time when to all outward appearance Israel was at the height of her prosperity. They who were at ease in Zion could point to the whole face of things to justify their confidence. But the prophet knew that, since God ruled in righteousness, a nation with rotten moral foundations had no foundation at all, however fair the surface of its life might seem. The truth of his teaching is written on every page of history, but it was never more powerfully expressed than in this chapter.

Reading 7: Amos 7:1-9; 8:1-3

COMMON THINGS AND ETERNAL MEANINGS

A plague of grasshoppers, a forest fire, a builder's plumb line, a basket of fruit—common things, all of them, but to the inspired mind of Amos they spoke of God and his judgments and his mercy, a mercy presumed upon and flouted.

Notice the power and terror of the vision of the plumb

line. The plumb line judges every wall alike by its straightness. A wall may be beautiful, ivy clad, associated with ancient and noble tradition, a grand old ruin; but the plumb line knows only that it is a ruin. The wall is straight or it is not; and if it is not, then as a wall it is useless and should be thrown down. Amos thinks of the Lord's judgments as like that; God has one standard only, and that standard is righteousness. Your state, your church, your character, all are measured by that unchanging standard. There is no substitute for righteousness in any man or any nation, and no excuse for a lack of it will avail.

The description of the intervention of the archpriest Amaziah immediately follows this vision of the plumb line. That vision is indeed devastating enough to have aroused and terrified the most complacent ecclesiastic. Read with the imagination at work as it should be and the mind alert, it must stir any heart and arouse any conscience.

Reading 8: Amos 8:4-14 RELIGION AND BUSINESS

See how vivid is the picture which the prophet draws of the orthodox worshiper whose religion and business practices are kept in separate compartments. There he is, in the temple on the feast day, going with all due diligence through the regular forms. But do what he may, he cannot stop his thoughts from slipping away to the delights of the workaday world, where money is to be made and business is strictly business.

Notice the tremendous figure of speech in v. 8. Such a vile perversion of religion is enough to cause an earthquake! It must centainly bring down the vengeance of an outraged God (vv. 7-10). Inevitably it means religious sterility, the worst kind of famine, when the life-giving word of God is heard no more by ears which have become attuned only to the clamor of Mammon (vv. 11-14). The separation of religion from business means the hardening of business

into a sordid and immoral scramble for profit at the expense of human life, and the lowering of religion to the level of a powerless and meaningless formality.

Can you ever forget this matchless thumbnail sketch?

Reading 9: Amos 9:1-10 THE LORD IN THE TEMPLE

Here is Amos's description of his vision of God standing beside the altar in the sanctuary man had built for him. Notice the flaming reality of the prophet's words. This is the true God whom Amos sees, and he is far too great for the showy magnificence of Bethel. Just what kind of God does Amos see? Is there any room in the world for any other deity? Are there any limits to his rule? What is his sole demand upon his people? What must be the marks of a true worship of such a God?

This surely is the work of a man to whom God came very near. It merits careful and thoughtful reading. And what does it mean for us? What would the Lord God think of the

temples we have built for him?

Written Work.—Choose one of the following themes and prepare either a brief paper or a brief sermon:

1. False faith. The religion of Amaziah.

Here is a man whose confidence in the complete validity of his religious belief and practice cannot be shaken even by the word of a prophet of God. Yet he is as far from true religion as a man can be. Just what is the matter with Amaziah? Does he stand for a religious blindness which is constantly appearing in the world?

2. A sermon on privilege and responsibility.
A suggested cutline (text Amos 3:2):

A. Introduction. The conditions which called forth this prophetic word.

B. The nature of privilege, material or spiritual. See Amos 2:9-11; 3:2a.

- C. The closeness of the relation of responsibility to privilege. It is an inescapable part of the nature of things. Material wealth must be properly used if it is not to ruin its possessors. It thus carries with it the responsibility for its right use. Spiritual privilege cannot be had without responsibility, for the vision of God means a demand for good living, and fades at once when that demand is refused.
- D. The privilege of responsibility. The opportunity to shoulder the burdens of a share in the betterment and redemption of the world is the highest privilege.

E. Conclusion. Application to ourselves as individuals and as a nation.

- 3. The characteristics of the Hebrew prophet as illustrated by Amos.
 - 4. The God whom Amos knew.

II

HOSEA

HOSEA should be read along with Amos. The two men lived at about the same time, and they supplement each other so well in their teaching that they are something like the two halves of a complete picture. In the introduction to his ABC commentary on Isaiah, R. W. Rogers has a masterly comparison of Amos and Hosea (p. 631) which is well worth careful reading. For an account of the background of Hosea's life and work see ABC, pp. 759-60.

If Amos tells of a God of justice, Hosea reveals a God of love. But the God of Amos is grieved over the sufferings of the poor, so that his justice is not mechanical or unfeeling; and the love of God which Hosea preaches is a moral love which will not be content with baseness or evil in those to whom it goes out, but which seeks rather to raise them to its own level of purity and beauty. The outlook of Amos is wider than that of Hosea, since he thinks of Jehovah as ruling the whole world, while Hosea is concerned almost entirely with the Israelite kingdom. But Hosea goes deeper than his brother prophet in tracing religion to its roots in an actual companionship with God like that of father and son, while Amos thinks of religion as summed up in obedience to the moral law, and the relation of man to God as that of a good subject to a wise and powerful ruler. Taken together they give us an idea of God in which love and

justice, strength and tenderness, power and beauty are combined as they seldom are even in the Bible. And Hosea was writing seven hundred and fifty years before Christ!

Reading 10: Hosea 1-3

A PRODIGAL WIFE AND PRODIGAL ISRAEL

These chapters make up the narrative portion of the book. They tell the story of the bitter tragedy in the prophet's own life which led him to a deeper understanding of his God and to a realization of the real nature of Israei's evil-doing.

In 1:2-9 Hosea has forced upon him the realization of his wife's long-standing untaithfulness to him. It is a sordid story, for she betrayed him for the sake of the material gifts her lovers had made her (2:5). He is compelled to put her away. Then in 3:1-4 he finds her offered for sale in a slave market to which she has come at the end of a long descent into ever deepening degradation. As he gazes at the poor bedraggled creature, he finds that his love for her is still strong—so strong that he cannot let her go, so strong that he dares to hope that she may yet be redeemed. He buys her in the hope that in the solitude of an enforced seclusion she may come to herself, that her lost womanhood may come to life again, that she may be fit to be once again his true wife, as she was in the days of the honeymoon which he has never forgotten.

Then as the prophet thinks of Israel's neglect of the true God, and of God's manifestations of love for his chosen people, the experience through which he has been going seems to light up the true meaning of this larger tragedy. His own suffering, his own love, seem to have been divinely ordained as a means of making it possible for him to understand the real blackness of Israel's sin, a gross betrayal of the divine love (2:2-5), and to feel the strength of a divine love which would surely seek to redeem the erring nation,

great though its sin, and, since it was divine, would not fail (2:14-20).

Notice that Hosea calls Israel's religion as it was practiced in his day mere Baal worship, a treacherous betrayal of the true God. The people would have denied this. They thought that they were worshiping Jehovah, not Baal, and the forms they employed were those sanctified by long use. But Hosea knew that both the forms and the spirit of their worship showed that material luxury and physical selfindulgence were first in their desires and uppermost in their prayers. Such a worship is incapable of ever reaching the true God, and people who thus worship can no more find him than a greedy and sensual woman can know and appreciate the honorable love of a true husband. Marriage for her at best is only legalized prostitution, at worst a veil for the sale of her body to her lovers. Israel may call her religion by the name of Jehovah, but when she does she dishonors the Name. Her religion is base and sordid; it is essentially false. She worships not because she rejoices in the goodness and truth of her God but because she wants wealth and the creature comforts which money can buy. In spirit and reality such worship is heathenism.

Here is the test of the true nature and real value of religious profession. What is it that is really sought after? For what do we pray? What are the dominant desires of the life we live between Sundays? Let us never think that we can keep our real desires from entering the church, can banish them from our hours of worship. Do we want most of all "the kingdom of God and his righteousness"—or a higher "standard of living" which is a matter of more wealth, more ease, more self-indulgence? Are we worshiping God or Baal?

Reading 11: Hosea 4

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

"Knowledge of God" is Hosea's expression for true religion (4:1b, 6). Note also 2:19-20; 6:6. What does Hosea

mean by this phrase? It has two possible meanings. It might be interpreted as meaning a knowledge of facts about God. It might also mean that knowledge which comes from actual acquaintance with God, which ripens as association continues and becomes closer. Quite evidently it is this kind of knowledge that Hosea means. Jehovah is the Father, the Husband, of Israel—Hosea uses both figures of speech (2: 11-20; 11:1). The relation of Israel to Jehovah should be one of close companionship.

Since Jehovah is the God of righteous love, to know him, to live in fellowship with him, means a life of truth and goodness (4:1; see also 2:19; 6:6). Only like can love like, and inevitably men become more and more like those to whom their give their heart's allegiance. True religion means fellowship with the true God, a communion with him

by which human life is enriched and transformed.

On the other hand, rejection of the offer of divine companionship can mean only a preference for the lower things of life (4:2, 10-11) and a steady descent toward the animal level. Note Hosea's terrible picture of the outcome of the centering of life on the sensual and the material in 4:6-19. To turn from God to serve the world and the flesh is to throw away man's highest opportunity.

Nowhere in the O.T. is there a more beautiful and heart-warming idea of religion than that taught by Hosea. If its beauty makes the contrasting picture of the irreligious life as black as anything in literature, it shines all the more radiantly because of the somberness of the background.

Reading 12: Hosea 6 THE WAY OF SALVATION

The chapter begins by a description of the easygoing way in which the Israelites of Hosea's day looked at sin—when they could be got to admit that sin was a fact. What is the general tone of 6:1-3? How seriously do the speakers take the idea of the Lord's displeasure? How can it be removed

and his favor regained? Is this a hard or an easy matter?

What does the prophet think of this frame of mind? What hope does he have for people who talk and think like that? (Hos. 6:4; see also 13:3.) Note 6:5; it is this reckless way of treating sin which explains the severity of the prophetic preaching and the harshness of the divine sentence, the fulfillment of which is as clear as the day. Real repentance will bring forth fruits worthy of it (6:6), but such fruits are not to be found in Israel (6:7-10). In this connection read also 10:12-13.

V. 6 of this chapter is perhaps the keynote of the book. Jesus quoted it (Mt. 9:13; 12:7). The word translated "mercy" in the A.V. (Authorized, or King James, Version) appears as "goodness" in the A.S.V. (American Standard, or Revised, Version). In other passages it is translated "loving-kindness." It means kindly, gentle, generous good will, shown in loving and gracious action. It is a loving-kindness like his own which God seeks in his people. Compare Mt. 5:48. This one verse would be enough to give Hosea a high place among the religious leaders of mankind.

Reading 13: Hosea 11

THE REDEEMING LOVE OF THE FATHER GOD

Notice the figures of speech which Hosea uses to express his idea of God. God is a physician (7:1; 11:3), a husband (2:16, 19); here he is a Father, tenderly rearing the son whom he has brought out of slavery in Egypt. These figures are drawn from the most tender and intimate of all human relationships. Note in 11:4 the great daring of the metaphor "cords of a man." In God the qualities which we call human (in the best sense of the word) find their perfection: "The highest, holiest manhood, thou."

Note the change of tone in vv. 5-7. Israel is a son, but a prodigal son, and he will reap the miserable harvest of prodigality. Hosea sees a new slavery, worse than that of

Egypt, which will come with all the horrors of Assyrian conquest.

But Hosea does not see this as the end of Israel's history (vv. 8-11). Notice the reason why he does not. (Note: The chapter ends with v. 11, and v. 12 belongs with ch. 12. In the Hebrew text it is the first verse of that chapter.) The God who has revealed himself to this prophet cannot cast Israel off; note the last clause of v. 8 and see also v. 9. Here is a splendid flash of prophetic insight. God is love; his love is too strong to be denied. All things, even the rebirth of a dead spiritual life, are possible to the Holy One. It is the feeble love of man which fails. The holiness of Jehovah has as its central element his invincible love.

Reading 14: Hosea 13 THE SIN AGAINST LOVE

Notice that Hosea's prophecies of doom are even more terrible than those of Amos. (See Hos. 18:7-14: also 7:11-16; 9:14-17; 10:8-10, 13-15.) But is not this the natural result of Hosea's conviction that the great central element in the character of God is love? Is not the sin against love more deadly than the sin against justice? What happens to the inner life of the man who tramples on love? What hope is there for him who has lost the power to appreciate the love of his mother? Surely only the most severe moral surgery can be of use in such a case as that. Hosea sees the coming doom of Israel as discipline meant to bring Israel to her senses, not as mere punishment. But it must be the most stern and rigorous chastisement, for nothing else will avail in a case like this.

Compare this chapter with Amos 3. Note the resemblance between Hos. 13:4-8 and Amos 3:1-2. In both cases, great privilege brings with it great responsibility, and the neglect of that responsibility means ruin. But note that there is in Hosea a sharper tone than is found in Amos.

HOSEA

Written Work.—Choose two of the following topics and write a brief paper on each:

- 1. The true worship of the true God. Hos. 1-3 and Jn. 4:23.
- 2. Religion as an experience of fellowship with God, and its results in the life of the worshiper. Hos. 4:1, 6 and Jn. 15:1-15.
- 3. The redeeming love of God. Hosea's prophetic vision as fulfilled in Christ. See Rom. 5:8.
 - 4. Hosea's teaching as an O.T. anticipation of the gospel.

III

ISAIAH 1-39

THE book of Isaiah is a great collection of prophetic writings which has for its nucleus the work of Isaiah the son of Amoz. The ABC commentary on Isaiah (pp. 628-40) begins with a paragraph calling attention to the importance and value of the book. A short but adequate account of the life and times of Isaiah is found on pp. 631-39 of this article. Read these pages carefully. For an analysis of the book of Isaiah, see p. 640. On the same page, in the paragraph headed "Other Prophecies," attention is called to the fact that the book contains much material which is not the work of Isaiah. Because of this fact the Readings in Isaiah are arranged in three sections: chs. 1-39, chs. 40-55, chs. 56-66.

Here it may be well to call attention to the fact that the authorship of a biblical writing has nothing to do with its religious value. The prophets themselves were not interested in attaching their names to their work. In many cases the names now attached to the prophetical books were added by editors who often had to guess at the authorship of the material they were arranging, so careless had the prophets been of leaving a great name behind them. Their only interest was in delivering the message which God had given them. That done, they were quite content to be forgotten. We have left to us the record of their preaching, and it is the power of these writings to inspire and instruct, to make us feel the presence of God, which is the warrant of their value, not the name on the title page. It is true that we can better understand a piece of writing, in the Bible or

out of it, if we know something of the author and of the circumstances under which he wrote. Hence the work of the so-called "higher critics" in trying to find out the real authors of the biblical writings has great value for us. For example, it helps us to appreciate Isa. 40-55 to know that it was written toward the end of the long exile of the Jews in Babylon by one who was moved to prepare his people for the work of re-establishing Jerusalem as the center of the national religion. But the fundamental value of the book of Isaiah is not affected by the discovery that it is a collection of prophecies from different men of different times rather than the work of one man.

Reading 15: Isaiah 1

THE RIGHTEOUS GOD AND SINFUL ISRAEL

Consult the notes on this chapter in ABC, pp. 640-41. Apparently this chapter is put at the head of the collection

as a summary of Isaiah's message.

Vv. 2-6 are a characteristic prophetic denunciation of Israel's sin. Notice the grandeur of the picture painted in v. 2. Who is the speaker, and to what witnesses does he appeal? The vastness of the scene is characteristic of Isaiah. So also is the vividness of the figure of speech in v. 3. V. 4 is a veritable torrent of accusation. A careful reading of these verses will enable us to understand what Dr. Rogers meant by saying that Isaiah was "a wizard of words" (ABC, p. 628a).

Characteristic also of Isaiah is the note of hope in vv. 9, 26-27, a hope which centers in the idea of a remnant of the nation which is to survive the general wreck and be-

come the nucleus of a restored people.

The main theme of vv. 10-17 is not new. Amos and Hosea have already developed it. What is new in Isaiah is the whirlwind force with which he expresses it—"ye rulers of Sodom," "ye people of Gomorrah." He makes his point by the skillful use of the most vivid and concrete images. He

masses details so that the whole scene comes to life before us. We see the crowded courts of the Temple, the slaughtered victims, the smoking altars, the priests and worshipers going in procession. But we are made to see it for what it really is-just so much empty, and therefore yulgar, show. With what a truly crashing effect comes that word 'trample" in v. 12! (This is an example of the way in which the A.S.V. frequently improves on the A.V.) The stately ritual procession becomes the noisy trampling of a mob intent on holiday. There is the power of a thunderclap in the contrast of v. 13-"iniquity and the solemn meeting." Notice also the powerful contrast between the divine indignation at the hypocritical show by which Israel seeks to worship the God of rightcousness, and Jehovah's tender regard for the oppressed and friendless. Care for the little people and their rights is the sacrifice which is acceptable to the God whom Isaiah knows.

This is great preaching. It brings us face to face with a living God and makes us see everything which crowds the poor and the lowly to the wall as what it is, an outrage against the Lord God which no amount of religious ceremony can excuse. It makes us tremble as we see in such things the sure and deadly seeds of national ruin.

Reading 16: Isaiah 2:5-4:1

AN ERA OF PROSPERITY IN THE LIGHT OF GOD'S PRESENCE

The keynote of the passage is in its first verse, 2:5. Take time to appreciate its full meaning. To what is Isaiah inviting his hearers?

Note that in v. 7 we have a picture of national wealth and power. But we see in vv. 8-11 how it looks to one who is walking in the light of the Lord. The prophet sees only danger where his fellow countrymen see security, the assurance of ruin where they see the certainty of an increasing prosperity (2:10-11; 3:1-7). Why does he thus take a view of the national situation which is exactly op-

posed to theirs? See 2:8; 3:8-15. With 3:13-15 compare 1:16-17, 23 and 5:7. By what is a nation judged in the light of the Lord?

Notice the prophet's power of what may be called moral analysis: the description of a situation as it affects the character of those concerned in it. Thus in 2:5 he describes the degrading effects of making money the standard of success. High and low alike are money mad, selling their very souls for wealth. Then vv. 10-11 let the light of God shine in on all this; its glamor vanishes, and we see it as it really is, sordid and vile. In 3:9 the shamelessness with which pleasure seekers parade their self-indulgence is vividly denounced. In 3:14-15 the real wickedness of money getting at the expense of the poor is set forth with the thunder and lightning of Sinai. Isaiah has an exceptional power to flash the moral realities of a situation before the eyes of his readers. He really does turn the light of God on men and their doings. What would he think of the civilization of which we boast? How would it look to us did we really walk in the light of the Lord?

Reading 17: Isaiah 5:1-7

WHAT GOD DEMANDS OF A NATION

See in ABC, p. 642a, the notes on the many references to this parable found in the Bible. The parable is an example of supreme skill in the expression of a great truth. Notice the way in which by one graceful touch after another the care of the beloved for his vineyard is brought out. He has indeed a right to expect a rich harvest. Then comes the crushing disappointment of the wild grapes. Just because everything that could be done for a vineyard has already been done, this is a failure which is beyond repair. Nothing is left but to abandon the vineyard altogether. So far it is a beautifully told incident of a farmer's failure with his vineyard. But in the latter part of v. 6 a new note is sounded.

The owner of this vineyard is the supreme ruler of nature. We are thus prepared for the application of the parable which is made with telling directness and simplicity in v. 7.

Here is the prophetic idea of what God looks for from a nation, or, for that matter, from civilization. How does this compare with the modern idea of national greatness? How well could our boasted civilization meet such a test as this? What should be the great aim of every statesman—and of every citizen?

Reading 18: Isaiah 5:8-30

THE DISEASE OF AN IRRELIGIOUS CIVILIZATION

Perhaps Isa. 10:1-4 belongs with this passage; it begins with the same phrase. Isaiah is describing a civilization in which the ability to get wealth and the enjoyment of pleasures of the senses are standards of success. Money and thrills are the great aims. It is a civilization in which the poor

do not count and God is only a name (vv. 8-12).

What were the diseases of Israel? Vv. 8-10 tell of the growth of great estates and the disappearance of the small farmer. Israel, like America, had her farm problem and faced the growth of great monopolies which destroyed small businesses. Of course this meant a great amount of suffering, but in a godless and money-mad age nobody cared much about that. Another result of the worship of wealth is sensual self-indulgence (vv. 11-12). A class of idlers with plenty of money soon appears and Satan finds plenty of vicious occupation for idle hands, especially when they have free access to full pockets. Notice the scorn with which here and in v. 22 the prophet brands the pampered rich for wasting all the power of their lives in the pursuit of pleasure -and even glorying in their folly! And all this in God's great world (v. 12). Vv. 18-19 sketch in lines of fire the brazen folly of men who, in open contempt for the moral law of God, welcome the chance to make money as justifying all manner of evil. Vv. 20-21 give us a biting description of the moral blindness which comes to greedy and lustful men, who not only lose the power to see the difference between right and wrong but actually begin to see evil as good because their only standard of valuation has become the amount of money they can make or the pleasure they can get. Vv. 22-23 enlarge upon this theme. The possession of a well-stocked bar, the ability to mix a cocktail, are the boast of these "mighty men," while the getting of money is quite enough to justify the corruption of the courts and the "framing" of innocent men! This is as modern as today, and with what superb skill does the prophet charterize the evils which always appear in a materialistic civilization!

Notice that two paragraphs begin with the significant word "therefore." There is a moral law of cause and effect. In v. 12 the sickness of the nation is traced to its leaders' disregard of God. In vv. 13-17 and 24-25, the end of that sickness is shown to be death. In a world which God rules in justice, a civilization which exalts the material and the physical above the moral is doomed. The true measure of value will assert itself (vv. 15-16, with which read Rev. 3: 17-18), and the inner decay of the nation will result finally in its outer ruin (v. 24). Vv. 26-30 give a terrible picture of an overwhelming attack by a tireless and pitiless foreign army. The concluding verse of the chapter sounds a note of utter hopelessness. Israel is like a fugitive hemmed in between a wild and impassable sea and a bleak storm bearing down from the land. Note the vividness of this picture painted in one sentence.

Reading 19: Isaiah 6

A VISION OF GOD

This chapter might well have been placed at the beginning of the book, for it tells of Isaiah's call to the prophetic mission. Notice the way in which the prophet avoids trying to make us see what he saw and sets himself to make us feel

what the vision did to him and for him. The whole chapter is a miracle of the expression of what seems to dety ex-

pression.

What was the first impression Isaiah's vision made upon him (vv. 1-4)? What feeling followed immediately upon this (v. 5)? What does this tell us as to the principal element in the "holiness" of Jehovah as Isaiah saw him? Was it almighty power or perfect goodness? Is it his weakness as merely human or his sinfulness which makes the prophet feel his unworthiness to behold the Lord (vv. 5-7)? What is the only way in which a man can be made fit for the divine service (vv. 6-8)? What is the prophet's task (vv. 9-13)? What is the use of preaching to people whose hearts are made only the harder by the message, to a nation whose ruin is certain? What would be Isaiah's answer to such questions? Part of it is to be found in the last clause of v. 13; but see Amos 3:8. The Hebrew prophet was a man working under divine compulsion who did not question his orders

What are the great characteristics of the God of Isaiah's vision? What are his relations to mankind?

Reading 20: Isaiah 7-8

THE POWER OF FAITH

Isaiah has been called the prophet of faith, so much did he emphasize this great element in religion. But notice the circumstances under which he preaches faith. Few of his prophecies can be exactly dated, but these chapters are an exception. They clearly refer to the time when Judah was attacked by Israel and Syria in an attempt to force King Ahaz to join them in a league against Assvria. Read 2 Kings 16 for an account of the measures taken by Ahaz to meet this danger and the results of his policy. See also the notes in ABC, pp. 643-44.

Note the dramatic setting of ch. 7. The man of God and the man of the world meet face to face at a time of

national crisis. Isaiah calls upon the king to take as the basis of his policy faith in the word of Jehovah.

Just what does Isaiah mean by faith? Is it some strange and mysterious power, apart from the ordinary processes of human life? Or is it a simple and straightforward reckoning in of God as an actual source of power in meeting practical problems? Is it for Isaiah a matter of depending on God as a reality, more important than the swords and the spears and the foreign alliances in which Ahaz is putting his trust? See Isa. 30:1-5; 31:1-3. Does it take the place of the calm and sensible consideration of all the facts in any given situation, or does it make such consideration more sane and therefore more effective? See Isa. 7:7-9; 28:16; 30:15.

Ahaz has another kind of faith. Note 7:12: the king is too reverently religious to ask God for a sign. What is the matter with a reverence like that? Ahaz thinks too highly of religion to bring it down to contact with practical affairs!

Written Work.—Write a brief paper on one of the following topics:

1. Real and false prosperity—true and false standards of living. Readings 16, 18.

2. Faith and her works. Reading 20.

3. God and man in Isa. 6.

Reading 21: Isaiah 10:5-34

THE MEANING OF HISTORY

Assyria was the great world power of Isaiah's time, and the little kingdom of Judah was one of the least of its many victims. We might compare Assyria to Germany in 1940 and Judah to Belgium or even to Luxemburg. But what does the prophet see as the real meaning and final outcome of the Assyrian conquest? Was he right? In the general course of history, what is the real importance of Assyria?

Of Judah? What testimony to the truth of Isaiah's prophetic

vision is, then, given by history?

Note the picture Isaiah draws of the conqueror: his ruthless greed and cruelty, his arrogant self-confidence, his profound ignorance of the real forces which are shaping the course of events and of his own real place in the divine plan. It is a portrait of the typical dictator of the type of Napoleon and Hitler. Note that Isaiah does not deny to the Assyrian king a place in the Lord's ruling purpose. But his place is that of a mere tool (vv. 12, 15-19). His proud self-confidence makes him ridiculous; in the end he is most dangerous to himself, for he does not know when his part is played and will blunder on to the ruin which cannot be escaped by the man who does not know the limitations which God has set for him.

Is Isaiah's view of history out of date? Or was he proclaiming an eternal truth?

Reading 22: Isaiah 9:2-7; 11:1-9; 32:1-8 THE TRUE KINGDOM AND THE TRUE KING

These are the Messianic prophecies of Isaiah. They tell of the time when the Lord God will realize his purpose for Israel by raising up a perfect king, one really worthy of the title of the Lord's Anointed ("messiah" means "anointed"). The notes on these passages should be carefully read: ABC, pp. 644-46, 651. See also "The Messiah and His Age," pp. 639-40.

Consider the difficulty of imagining a king who would be a perfect representative of God on earth, and then see how a prophet can succeed where anyone else would be bound to fail. This is inspiration. No wonder that the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy waited till the coming of Christ himself.

Each of these passages has its own special emphasis, and each should be read with the object of grasping this char-

acteristic message.

In 9:2-7 the emphasis is on the glory of the true king's

government. What are its elements of greatness? Notice how completely this idea transcends all that lust for power and profit which is the very heart of the thing we call imperialism.

In 11:1-9 the emphasis is on the grandeur of the king's character. What makes it great? What are the elements which make it up, and how does the king attain them?

In 32:1-8 the emphasis is on the glory of the king's *leader-ship* as inspiring and strengthening his people. What will characterize the life of the people in the perfect kingdom? (Note vv. 1-2: the source of the life of the kingdom is the leadership and example of the king.)

However, there is an underlying agreement in all these different pictures. Whence does the king get his right and power to rule? See 9:7, the last sentence; and 11:2. What common quality is seen in all these passages about the king's rule, his character, and his leadership (9:7; 11:4-5; 32: 1)? What is the importance of the emphasis on peace in 9:6, 7; 11:6-9?

Reading 23: Isaiah 13-19; 21; 23

THE RULE OF GOD IN A WORLD OF TURMOIL

These chapters illustrate the prophetic outlook on the changes and calamities of the world in which little Judah lived out the last century and a half of her existence as a nation. Taken together they are far too long for one *Reading*, but they are so much alike in their subject and in their treatment of it that they cannot well be broken up into several. The passages which convey the main ideas will therefore be indicated.

Note the frame of mind of the prophet as he looks at a world at war, the rise and fall of nations, the hopes and fears and agonies of the peoples. He is not surveying this whirlpool from the safety of a place outside. He is a member of one of the little nations which are quite helpless to avoid the storm. Isaiah and his fellow prophets are not un-

moved; fear and pity sweep over them (21:3-4). But still they are not overwhelmed by the fierce tides that ebb and flow; for they stand above them on the steps of God's throne, and to them is given a faith in the divine power which enables them to see order and purpose in this apparent confusion of ruin (13:4-5, 6-11, 14:24-27. 32; 18:4; 19:12; 21:10; 23:9). They are not always able to plot with accuracy the course of events (see in ABC, p. 649, the note on ch. 23) but the general meaning of history is clear to them, and to that meaning they point their fellow countrymen as the ground of a sure hope. The central thought of these chapters is found in 18:4 the peace of God enthroned on high above the turmoil of a world governed in spite of itself by his unshakable will.

Other passages in these chapters may be noted as especially fine. In 13:19-22 there is a memorable description of the desolation of once mighty Babylon; in 14:9-11 is a vivid picture of the descent of her proud monarch into the shadowy realm of the dead. There is in 19:19-25 a noble vision of a redeemed world in which Israel and the nations which once oppressed her share the blessings of the Lord. If time permits, you may well read these.

Reading 24: Isaiah 20: 22:1-14 ONE MAN AGAINST A NATION

The prophet was often a minority of one, but he was never overawed by the weight of the numbers against him. In these chapters we have a study in the prophetic defiance of an unbelieving world.

Note the daring of Isaiah's action as it is related in ch. 20. Use your imagination to picture the sensation which he must have made when he appeared year after year in the nakedness of a captive. How that sensation must have deepened when he cried out in the ears of all Jerusalem the meaning of his strange action! How would the people like whom they were depending for security and victory? In ch. 22 the prophet speaks at a time when the whole city is celebrating a victory (vv. 1-2, 13). What is his message on this V Day (vv. 4-14)? Note the sharp contrast in vv. 12-13, and the undertone of despair in the defiant answer of the people in v. 13b.

How could the prophet escape being swept away by the general feeling of the hour? Was he lacking in patriotism? Of such a lack he was no doubt accused, and such an accusation is always dangerous, especially in time of war. How did he escape the reckless despair which finds utterance in v. 13? What made him able to read the signs of the times so much better than his fellow countrymen? What was the secret of the power by which the prophet lived so close to the world of his own day without being merely a part of it?

In what sense could Isaiah be said to be the only sane man in all Jerusalem? Notice the conflicting elements in current thought and feeling (vv. 5, 9-11). Even in the midst of their frantic rejoicing over victory these people are preparing for a siege the outcome of which they know will be disastrous. See again the last clause of v. 13, the mad defiance of despair. Sober repentance is clearly the part of wisdom, but these people will not admit it. Is not this the exact reverse of sane thinking?

Reading 25: Isaiah 28

RELIGION AND NATIONAL POLICY

Of ch. 28 George Adam Smith wrote: "It is distinguished by that regal versatility of style which places its author at the head of Hebrew writers. Keen analysis of character, realistic contrasts between sin and judgment, clever retorts and epigrams, rapids of scorn and a 'spate' of judgment, but for the final issue a placid stream of argument banked by sweet parable—such are the literary charms of the chapter which derives its moral grandeur from the force with which

its current sets towards faith and reason as together the salvation of states, politicians, and private men." (The

Book of Isaiah, I, 151.)

The chapter begins with a terrible picture of the North ern Kingdom in the days of her final downfall. Think of the effect of this grim tragedy which was being acted beneath the very eyes of the people of Jerusalem. It was a kindred nation which was thus going down in blood. Note Isaiah's reason for dwelling thus upon the fate of the sister kingdom (v. 14). The evils which have ruined Israel are eating away the life of Judah. The same God whose judgment is being visited on Samaria rules also in Jerusalem. V. 15 is the answer of the great men of Judah; by clever trickery and crafty scheming they have made friends with the power which threatens them. They have appeased Assyria, "the overflowing scourge." Vv. 9-10 are another reply of the selfconfident leaders of Judah. The prophet with his continual harping on the old theme of God's demand for a righteous national life is tiresome. Does he think he is talking to a parcel of children? They have had enough of his copybook

What is Isaiah's reply to all this? Vv. 16-22 express the unalterable decree of the Lord God. Compare vv. 16-17 with Amos 7:7-9. Note the homely but powerful figure in v. 20: there can be no real peace from recourse to dishonorable alliance with evil (vv. 18-19). It is the height of folly thus to disregard the facts of a world which is morally ruled, as mad as for a man to try to find comfortable repose on a bedstead too short for him with coverings too scanty. These people who are so well satisfied with their own wisdom have not only Assyria but God himself to reckon with (vv. 21-22). Do they say that God's way is strange and unbelievable? Perhaps it is, but it is still his way—and it is irresistible. If they will not listen to the message which God sends them through his prophets, there will be other teachers whose speech will be even harder to understand but whose

ISAIAH 1-39

message will be made plain through unanswerable deeds—the ruthless soldiers of foreign invaders (vv. 11-13).

The chapter closes with a parable (vv. 23-29). What does it mean, and how does it apply to the main theme of the chapter?

Written Work.-Write on one of the following topics:

- 1. For what purpose does God ordain "the powers that be"? Readings 17, 25.
- 2. The marks of the true King-God's Anointed. Reading 22.
- 3. God as the ruler of history-man's proposing and God's disposing. Readings 21, 23.

ISAIAH 40-55

A GOOD summary of the reasons for taking these chapters as separate from the preceding section of the book of Isaiah is given in ABC, pp. 653-54.

Whoever wrote them, they contain some of the noblest writing in the Bible. Notice what Dr. Rogers has to say in his note on Isa. 40:1-11 (ABC, pp. 654-55). Writing like this should be read aloud. It has the music of all great poetry, and the English of the A.V. brings out the beauty

of the prophet's style.

There is a very close unity of theme in these chapters and a steady consistency in the way in which it is handled. The prophet never wanders from his main purpose, to awaken in his people a new hope and the will to do their share in realizing it. Nor does he depart from his convict. In that the way to attain his aim is to bring Israel to realize the greatness and loving-kindness of her God. This means that there is a repetition of the same ideas. Hence the message of this prophet may be grasped by reading a few selected passages with references to others which carry the same meaning. The variety of these chapters is less in ideas than in the form in which they are expressed.

Reading 26: Isaiah 40 NEW LIFE FOR EXILED ISRAEL

This chapter is a splendid introduction to the whole prophecy. The prophet sees the dawn of a new age as close

at hand (see ABC notes on this passage, pp. 654-55). But it must be remembered that the people to whom he spoke did not share his hopes. For them the night of their captivity seemed endless. They had grown up as members of a despised minority, amid the pride and power of Babylon; and they were not easily aroused to the hope of liberation, nor easily persuaded to accept the new tasks which would come with liberty. If they thought of the growing power of Cyrus as threatening to destroy Babylon, all that meant to them was a change of masters.

What, then, was the aim of the prophet? What was his task? By whom was the work of preparing the way of the Lord to be done (v. 3)? What is the feeling expressed in vv. 6-7? This may be taken as the reply of the people to the prophetic challenge. In v. 8 the prophet speaks again. What is the ground of his hope (vv. 9-31)? Note the way in which he goes "the whole round of creation," and comes finally to the tender assurance of vv. 29-31: the supreme power of the universe is wielded by infinite love.

This is the inspired effort of a great prophet to make his fellows see what he sees a world to which God is about to give a new revelation of his glory, and that through his

chosen people.

The fulfillment of prophecy has always been appealed to as a proof of the divine inspiration of the Bible. Here was a man who saw in a little group of despondent exiles the people of the great God who had created the heavens and the earth, the people to whom he was now about to give a new birth of freedom, with the opportunity to help him in the rebuilding of the world. How well has this vision been fulfilled?

Reading 27: Isaiah 46:1-7

THE LIVING GOD AND IDOLS

This is one of many passages in which the true God is contrasted with the idols of the heathen.

What is the contrast here? Compare vv. 1-2 with vv. 3-4. Note the power with which the utter folly of idol worship is exposed in vv. 5-7. See also Isa. 41:7. There is a longer passage dealing with the same idea in Isa. 44:9-20.

Remember that the prophet was simply stating the facts about the religion of Babylon which did not differ in any important respect from the religions of the other nations of the time. All were centered around the worship of idols. In the light of this fact, consider the value of the effort made by Israel's religious leaders to save her from being swallowed up in the mass of the Babylonian population. The disappearance of Israel would have meant the disappearance also of her religion. How much would that have affected the religious history of mankind?

Note the way in which passages like this emphasize the superiority in religion which marked the Hebrew people. Babylon was a great center of culture and civilization, in every respect but one she was far in advance of Israel. Later on Greece and Rome were leaders of the world in thought and action. Always, however, Israel was the religious teacher of the world. The proof is in writings like this in which the pitiable weakness of Babylon's religion stands over against the majesty of Israel's knowledge of the true God. The relics of these great heathen religions are now in the museums; their gods are among the monuments of antiquity. But the God of Israel is worshiped the wide world over.

Reading 28: Isaiah 41:8-20

THE MERCIES OF GOD

In Isa. 40–55 are found some of the grandest expressions in all religious literature of the majesty and power of God. But it is to be noticed that always the eternal might of the Lord is directly linked with his tender care for his people. The prophet emphasizes it as affording ample ground for

the hope he is trying to arouse in his people. "So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too."

Notice in v. 8 the reference to Abraham and the name given to him. What is the point of this reference? Is the God who speaks an unknown Being, of whom Israel has had no previous experience? Is v. 9 a prediction or a reference to past history? In v. 10 there is a reference to the righteousness of Jehovah as a source of hope and comfort. Is the righteousness of God appealed to in previous prophecies as ground for hope or as a warning of judgment? (See Amos 3:2; 4:2; Isa. 28:17.) How can this change in emphasis be explained? Justice is here reconciled with mercy; because God is just (righteous) he will redeem captive Israel. In v. 14 the weakness and insignificance of Israel are fully admitted. But what makes up for it? Vv. 17-20 are a moving assurance of God's use of his almighty power for the help of the weak and oppressed. It is only his help (v. 20) which can avail; the sign of God's work is mercy for those who are forsaken by the world.

Reading 29: Isaiah 41:21-29

THE GOD WHO POINTS THE WAY

Again and again in these chapters we find the appeal to Jehovah's power to show his people the true direction of history. In a knowledge of the true God is the only key to the meaning of life. See Isa. 43:8-21; 44:6-8; 45:11-13, 20-25.

Isa. 41:21-24 is a direct challenge to the heathen gods to tell their worshipers the true meaning and final outcome of the events which were taking place in the world at that very time. See also vv. 26, 28-29. For a sketch of the times see ABC notes on ch. 41, p. 665, and "The Historical Background," p. 654. What was the prophet's belief as to the outcome of this world revolution (41:27)? What was the real power which was at work (41:25)?

This is a good example of prophetic prediction. It is confident, and in the main it is correct. The breakup of the

Babylonian Empire and its conquest by Cyrus did result in a rebirth of Judaism, and this was for the long sweep

of history its most important result.

How did the prophets know this? See Mt. 5:8: Jesus says that the pure in heart shall see God, that is, know him clearly. The prophetic insight was the endowment of men whose purity of heart enabled them to see God as the great Reality, and hence as the Power which determined the course of history. That meant that the hour of Israel's greatest need was the hour of God's crowning mercy. The conquest of Cyrus meant more to Israel than a change of masters; it meant, in the mercy of God. a new birth. Divine inspiration is the reward of the pure in heart!

Reading 30: Isaiah 40:12-26

This is a sublime description of the one God as Creator and Preserver of all things. Note the various elements which make up the great picture. How can the divine power be measured (v. 12)? How can we get even a faint idea of its greatness? See also vv. 15-17. In v. 13 the prophet is emphasizing the self-sufficiency of God. V. 14 repeats that idea but with an added emphasis on the all-sufficiency of the divine wisdom. The folly of trying to picture God in forms visible to the eye is evident once you think of the vastness of creation and the infinite superiority to all human ideas of the power there displayed (vv. 18-26). V. 23 reminds the reader that the Creator still reigns, not only in nature but in the determination of the course of all human history. The sublime spectacle of the starry heavens attests the majesty of their Creator (v. 26). Compare Psa. 8 and 19.

Reading 31: Isaiah 42:1-7; 49:1-7 THE SERVANT OF THE LORD

For a discussion of these and the other "servant passages," see the notes on each in ABC, pp. 655-56, 659-60, and the

longer note on pp. 664-65. The early church made these passages the key to the understanding of the whole body of

Scripture. For an example of this see Acts 8:26-35.

The prophet is speaking of one who will be the perfect representative of the Lord, who delights in him (42:1; 49: 1-3, 5), and endows him with his own power (42:5-7: 49: 2-3, 6-7). As the Servant of the only true God, he has a mission not to Israel only but to all the world (42:1, 6; 49:6). Great, however, as he is, and vast though his work, the Servant is marked by humility and patience (42:2-3), dealing gently with the weaknesses of mankind. He labors with unyielding persistence and strength, and in the end he wins a world-wide victory in the cause of justice, which is the cause of Jehovah, the knowledge of whom he brings to all men (42:4, 6-7; 49:4, 6-7).

Notice the broadening of the religious outlook. The Gentiles are now the object of divine love and care. Notice also the way in which the perfect Servant will do his work, winning mankind by self-effacing gentleness. He is a servant and not a conquering king. In what sense may the idea of these passages be said to mark the culmination of the

prophetic teaching?

Reading 32: Isaiah 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12 THE SUFFERING REDEEMER

Why must the perfect Servant of the Lord suffer? (See Mk. 8:31; 10:45.) In all the passages which describe him, he is meek and humble, despised by a world which does not understand him (49:7; 52:14-15; 53:2-4); and in 50:6 and 52:13-53:12 he suffers and dies as a part of his redeeming work. The way of the Servant of the Lord is not the way of men but the way of God.

The vision of this prophet remained an unfulfilled and little understood ideal until Jesus walked in the way of victorious self-giving and, being lifted up, drew all men

unto himself.

Reading 33: Isaiah 55 COD'S GRACIOUS INVITATION

This really magnificent chapter should be read and reread, as indeed it has been by numberless devout people through the ages. Consider the keynote of the chapter in vv. 1-2. Here are good things which money cannot buy nor labor earn, yet they are the very things which alone can satisfy. These verses may have inspired James Russell Lowell's familiar lines:

'T is heaven alone that is given away,
'T is only God may be had for the asking.

V. 3 rounds out the idea: the gift of God is for those who listen to his gracious invitation.

In vv. 4-5 there is a promise which is in one sense a promise to Israel of a leader. Always that is man's greatest need. Compare Mt. 9:36 and Jn. 10:14. In another sense, however, this is a promise that Israel herself shall furnish leadership to all mankind; compare Jn. 17:18.

Note the only demand made of the sinner (vv. 6-7). Then notice the connection of this offer of pardon with vv. 8-9. There is a vast difference between the divine and the human; but what is it of which the prophet is here thinking? Not of a difference in greatness of power. God's thoughts are higher than man's in what respects?

The word of God is the word of power: power to do what (vv. 10-13)? Power used for what purpose? (Cf. Jn. 1:1-18, the Word made flesh. Only the Gospel could add anything to this prophetic vision. But see what it adds!) Notice the crowning touch in the last half of v. 13: the glories of God's own mercies are perpetual reminders to him. God is bound by his own goodness, by the splendor of his gracious character. He cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13).

ISAIAH 40-55

What is the ruling element in the life of God as it appears in this chapter?

Written Work.-Write on one of the following topics:

- 1. The God of Isa. 40-55.
- 2. The perfect Servant of God: his work, his methods, his character.
 - 3. The meaning of suffering.

Or make a list of passages which especially appeal to you, with notes telling why each was selected.

V

ISAIAH 56-66

THERE are reasons for taking these chapters as a collection of prophecies of a date considerably later than that of Isa. 40-55. See ABC, p. 668 and the note on chs. 60-62, p. 671. Whatever the date or the authorship, there are to be found in this section of Isaiah passages which rank with the best in the O.T. They richly repay a careful reading.

Reading 34: Isaiah 56:1-8 HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL NATIONS

Notice the change of tone from previous chapters. In ABC, p. 668, Dr. Rogers is somewhat severe in remarking on this. What are the elements in religion which chiefly interest the writer of this passage? In v. 1 he speaks of righteousness; but how does he define righteousness in v. 2 (see also vv. 4, 6)? What does he emphasize in vv. 5-7? This passage seems to come from a time when there was once again a Temple in Jerusalem, and great value was placed on its services of worship. But the prophet is not interested merely in the forms of religion, nor is he a narrow nationalist (see vv. 3-5, 6-8).

V. 7 is of special interest for its breadth of outlook and its stress on prayer, the most intimate and spiritual element in any form of worship. It was quoted by our Lord when he cleansed the Temple.

If this prophet is perhaps inclined to be a little too much interested in eunuchs and proselytes, still he has a

vision of Israel gathering into her fellowship all those of every nation who seek the true God. Jesus found in him at least some degree of kinship in spirit.

In what sense was this vision fulfilled? (See Rom. 1:16;

Gal. 3:13-14; 6:16; Phil. 3:3.)

Reading 35: Isaiah 56:9-57:21

THE TWO WAYS-TO DESTRUCTION AND TO LIFE

Here is a vivid picture of the contrast between the wages of sin and the gift of God. Notice that the prophet is denouncing a corruption of Israel's national life and that he begins by an attack on the rulers (56:9-12). The nation is thrown wide open to disaster because her official protectors are given over to a lust for gain and pleasure. From the men holding the high places in government (the shepherds) to those of the rank and file (the sheep dogs) it is the same story of shameless greed and reckless self-indulgence. The good perish unregarded; they find peace only in their graves (57:1-2).

Religion, instead of acting as a restraining and cleansing influence, is itself false and evil—a mere revival, even in restored Jerusalem, of the old, grossly immoral worship of the high places (57:3-13). Notice v. 12: the fruit of such a debased religion is a vile parody of real goodness. A corrupt nation has corrupted its religion and made it useless as a refuge in the storm which the prophet sees at hand (v. 13). Amos and Hosea and Isaiah are speaking once more. The battle for a pure and spiritual religion must be fought

again and again.

Thus that way of life which turns public office into a means of selfish profit and makes religion a partner in self-indulgence is the way of doom. It is a life of endless turmoil and perpetual craving (57:20-21). But there is another way, the way of true religion. It is the way of those who see leadership as an opportunity for unselfish service, and devote themselves to the humble and arduous task of build-

ing the road on which the nation may march to security and greatness (57:14). It is the way of those who are inspired by a great vision of the God in whom majesty and power are united with tenderness and love. V. 15 of ch. 57 is a truly magnificent expression of prophetic insight. Consider the value of this great truth. It is one of the great marks of the religion of the Bible. Power alone is not enough, and love without power is helpless to save. The God of the Bible is mighty to save. Vv. 16-19 follow with a proclamation of the undeserved mercy of God (cf. Rom. 5:8).

Reading 36: Isaiah 58:1-12

THE TRUE FAST

Here the prophet is addressing a generation which is proud of the way it has reformed and purified its forms of worship and of its strict observance of them. We must imagine the restored Temple and the elaboration of its ritual, with every care taken to get rid of everything which had offended the great prophets of former times. But something is lacking and the prophets know what it is. The reality of religion is not in careful attention to forms, no matter how good the forms may be. Where is it? Compare Mk. 7:1-23 and Mt. 25:31-46. Notice in the passage we are reading (Isa. 58:8) the reference to 52:12; the people are complaining that this great promise has never been fulfilled. But the promises of God, says the prophet, are not unconditional. What are the divine conditions (vv. 6-12)? Note in vv. 10-12 the splendid description of the true fast and its fruits. There is no disappointment to those whose religion is deep and true.

Why is it that religious people in every age and in every land are apt to slip into thinking of religious duty as fulfilled in a careful attention to the forms of worship? Why do they so often tend to reduce self-denial to minor things like occasional fasts, or to "giving up" this or that minor

pleasure during Lent? How can this dangerous tendency be overcome?

Reading 37: Isaiah 60

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

This is a prophecy of the final glory of Israel. What is the nature of Israel's future greatness, a greatness which makes her the light of the world? Notice that there is no mention of military power, or of superior scientific knowledge, or of unusual ability to create new forms of material wealth. What is it then? See vv. 1-3, 19-20. It is a clear revelation of God which raises Israel to a supreme place among the nations of the world. This means also a great access of moral power (v. 21). The prophets never forgot that righteousness was a central element in true godliness.

We are reminded, however, that this is still the O.T., that complete freedom from racial and national limitations has not yet been reached. Note vv. 4-5, 10-14, 16-17: Jerusalem is to be the overlord of the world, receiving from it tribute and service. However, it must be noted that even here there is humility. It is by the favor of God, and only by that favor, that Jerusalem becomes lord of the world. Notice also the insistence that her greatness is based on spiritual blessing. By their realization of Israel's possession of a revelation of the true God the nations are led to a voluntary self-dedication to the service of the glorious City of God (vv. 6, 8-9, 14, 17).

All in all, it is a magnificent chapter. Only the N.T. revelation, with its complete spiritualizing of religion, could surpass it. (Ch. 62 is a different expression of the

vision of glorified Zion.)

Reading 38: Isaiah 61

THE DAY OF THE LORD

The text and real substance of this sermon is in vv. 1-3. This passage is notable, of course, for having been read

in part by our Lord in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk. 4:17-19). Consider the point at which Jesus "closed the book." Perhaps it was part of his commentary on the passage. Note the second phrase of v. 2 and the restrictive opening of v. 3. The Lord Jesus was adding something to the prophets; he was fulfilling them, not merely repeating them.

Amos had thought of the day of the Lord as a day of doom (Amos 5:18-20). Now it appears as a day of deliverance. But notice who is delivered. It is the poor and downtrodden, the forgotten men whose neglect and oppression had called forth the stern warnings of Amos. To them is now promised "the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness" (v. 3). The place of Israel among the nations is illustrious, but it is described as one of priestly service (v. 6). The nation's exaltation is due to the blessing of God, a blessing which is manifested in her righteousness (vv. 9-11). Dominant throughout is the spirit of humble trust in the power of Jehovah and in his justice and mercy. The chapter may be compared with Lk. 1:46-55, the song of Mary.

Reading 39: Isaiah 63:7-64:12

SONGS IN THE NIGHT

This passage is pitched in a minor key. Underlying it is the profound sorrow of people who have lost their all (63:17-19; 64:5-7, 10-12). But there is no trace of bitterness in it. Well do the mourners know that the suffering of their nation are deserved punishment for her unfaithfulness to her God (63:10, 17; 64:5-7). Yet they sorrow not as those without hope (63:9, 15-16; 64:4, 8-9). Here are songs in the night, and what glorious songs they are! Consider the value of faith like this in its humble submission to the will of God as always good will. Read again 63:16; 64:8: "Thou art our Father." God is here the Father of the nation, of course, not of the individual Israelite, but the idea of fatherhood is there. When our Lord taught his disciples to

pray "Our Father," he was fulfilling this ancient prophecy, filling it with a new and richer meaning.

Reading 40: Isaiah 65

MAN'S LIFE AS IT IS AND AS GOD WOULD HAVE IT

First of all, notice how the prophet faces the hard and dreary facts about life in Jerusalem. A religion which is disfigured by superstition and idolatry (vv. 3-4, 7, 11) and by a self-righteous pride in the performance of meaningless ceremonies (v. 5) makes the city a place where true piety has a hard struggle for existence. Nevertheless, there are even here those who serve God aright (v. 8), and in them is the hope of a better future (vv. 9-10). From them shall grow up a true religion for all the earth.

But this coming of true religion means a complete transformation of human life. Then it will be what God has always meant it to be. In part, of course, the picture which the prophet draws has for its frame a vast re-creation of the universe, a change in the nature of the heavens and the earth (vv. 17, 20, 25). But notice how comparatively small a part this outward change plays in the change of human life which comes from a true knowledge of the nature and will of God and a full surrender to his will. What is the difference between human life as it is and as God wills it? What are the marks of the new life as it is described in vv. 18-19, 21-24? Would any miraculous changes in the outer world be needed to bring about such blessings? Even the lengthening of life in v. 20 is not beyond the possibilities of a redeemed humanity. How much of the disease which shortens human life is due to greed and folly?

Were the prophets only dreamers? Or were their dreams

inspired?

Reading 41: Isaiah 66
PROMISE AND JUDGMENT

At first glance this chapter may seem a strange mixture of stern rebuke and glowing promise, of warnings of judg-

ment and assurances of blessing. It begins with an outright rejection of the worship of the restored Temple (vv. 1-4). It is valueless, even worse than useless. But this does not mean that the Lord has forsaken his people. The people are not judged in the mass; the contrite and the humble may be assured of God's favor. Then the paragraph ends in a renewal of the note of judgment (v. 6).

In vv. 7-14 is another of those brilliant descriptions of the fullness of the divine blessing which occurs so often in this prophecy. But in vv. 15-17 there is a terrible denunciation of the divine judgment upon idolatrous Jerusalem. Then comes the promise of a reunited Israel brought from the ends of the earth (vv. 18-23). The last word,

however, is again a dark threat of judgment.

Here is an expression of the truth that the coming of perfect righteousness means the doom of evil. The dawning of the light means the destruction of darkness. The more glorious the manifestation of God, the more terrible the fate of the ungodly. The more radiant the promise, the more dreadful the end of those who spurn it. There is no room for self-righteousness. "Our God is a consuming fire"—this comes from a N.T. book (Heb. 12:29) in which this O.T. idea is treated as a part of the Christian message.

Written Work.-Write on two topics, as follows:

- 1. These chapters are rich in brief passages of exceptional beauty and inspiration. Make your own list of them, with notes pointing out their value. See, for example, Isa. 57: 14-15; 60:19-20; 63:9; 66:13. There are many others.
 - 2. Write on one of the following topics:
 - a) The "two ways" in Isa. 56:9–57:21.
 - b) The mission of the prophet as described in Isa. 60:1-3.
- c) The nature of Israel's redemption as seen in Isa. 60:
 - d) The true last as described in Isa, 58:1-12.

VI

MICAH

MICAH is mentioned in Jer. 26:18 as prophesying in the reign of Hezekiah. In Mic. 1:5-6 the fall of Samaria is predicted as though it were near at hand. Hezekiah came to the throne in 720 and Samaria was destroyed in 721. Probably, therefore, Micah began his work as a prophet about 722 a.c. We have no way of determining the date at which his career ended. For a discussion of the history of his time and the main elements in his message, see ABC, pp. 791-92.

The really tremendous power of the prophetic utterance is nowhere better illustrated than in the first three chapters of this book. It might be worth while to try to state for ourselves the sources of this power as far as they appear in the record. There is a sustained passion which rings in every line. There is a completeness of conviction; the prophet never feels any need of qualifications or reservations. The man's imagination is vigorously at work; he sees the things of which he is speaking, and because he sees them he can make us see them too. Above all, there is evident a quick and sure consciousness of God.

Chs. 4-7 are quieter in tone, and this difference has been taken by some scholars as one indication, among others, that these chapters are from other prophets and have been added to Micah's own work by editors of a time later than his. Mic. 4·1-5 is found almost word for word in Isa. 2:2-4. Of course it cannot have been written by both these prophets. See notes on Mic. 4, ABC, pp. 795-96.

Reading 42: Micah 1

GOD'S JUDGMENT AND HIS PEOPLE

Carefully read the notes on this chapter in ABC, pp. 792-93. The prophet is a native of Judah, looking with sorrow and terror on the ruin of Samaria as it goes down in a courageous struggle against hopeless odds. But he is a prophet, and he sees this tragic event in the light of his vision of God. It is the judgment of the Lord upon an unfaithful people. The great city of which Israel has been so proud has been the terrible badge of her corruption, the focus of her iniquity (vv. 5, 7). What would Micah think of our great cities, of which we boast?

To the people of the two kingdoms the struggle which came to a terrible end with the fall of Samaria must have seemed like a great battle for freedom in which the heroic people of little Israel dared to defy the huge robber empire of Assyria. But Micah sees it as something quite different. It is all part of the madness by which Israel has failed to see the glory of her true destiny as the people of God and has sought instead to find greatness as one of the kingdoms of this world. Her blindness has sealed her doom. Compare with this Lk. 19:41-44. The survival of Israel would mean nothing to the world, for she has ceased to stand for anything worth while. In Micah there is the clear insight into the real nature of things which is the mark of the prophet, He has, too, the prophet's courage to preach to all the world the unpopular and unpleasant truth which he sees so clearly.

But Micah is not preaching unpleasant truths without a purpose. His message is for his own people of Judah. The fate of Samaria should be a warning to them, for it will be the fate of Jerusalem unless they repent. Jerusalem also is coming under the judgment of God, and for the same reasons as those which have doomed Samaria (vv. 5, 9). All the places named in vv. 8-15 are in the territory of

Judah; the prophet sees the tide of invasion which has submerged Israel as about to sweep over Judah as well.

This chapter is another example of the insistence of the prophets that the choosen people of God must show themselves worthy of his choice. To every generation which struggles to preserve its freedom this word comes as a challenge. Is your liberty worth saving? the prophets ask. If you should perish would the cause of true righteousness suffer? Or have you wearied the patience of God and betrayed his trust?

Reading 43: Micah 2

UNPOPULAR PREACHING

This chapter presents unusual difficulty in translation. Use the notes in ABC, pp. 793-94. If you can, read the chapter in Moffatt's translation.

The prophets were not popular preachers, and here we are shown what was a common enough situation. Micah is rebuked as one who slanders Jehovah by the severity of his predictions. We are reminded of the modern dislike of

any mention of the judgment of God.

The chapter begins by giving a brief summary of one of Micah's sermons (vv. 1-3). Note the last clause of v. 1. Moffatt translates it "Because they can." Might is the only right which these wretches know. Then in v. 3 there is a deadly parallel between the plotting of these oppressors and the awful purpose of God (cf. vv. 1 and 3). In v. 4 the prophet declares that Judah is to lose her heritage; the greedy lords who steal the holdings of the small farmers will themselves suffer a dreadful disinheritance in the ruin of the nation which their folly is destroying.

Vv. 6-7 express the shocked reproof of the successful and respectable men who hear the prophet call down the wrath of God on them for their use of what are entirely legal business methods. Micah is reminded that to the chosen people God is not a God of wrath but a God of

kindness. In vv. 8-10 Jehovah himself answers. These people who boast that they are members of the chosen race, who talk about their uprightness, what are they doing? How can they be so blind to the iniquity of their ways? In v. 11 is a grimly ironical description of the kind of prophet who could appeal to people like that. This is the kind of preacher which they like—and deserve.

To appreciate the full tragedy of the chapter, the men who are quoted in v. 7 must be seen in all their blind moral smugness. They see no harm in the shrewd business practices by which they add farm to farm. They have the pious phrases of religion at the tips of their tongues—they can talk about the grace of God to the upright. But they are quite blind to the real truth about themselves, and are outraged when anyone is bold enough to tell it to them. Then, too, the resemblance to modern conditions needs to be seen. In Steinbeck's book *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the film made from it, we are presented with a condition like that which Micah faced.

The closing promise (vv. 12-13) does not cancel the message of doom. But the Lord's gracious promise for Israel will not be permanently brought to nought. A remnant of the shattered nation will return, and a new Israel will rise on the ruins of the old. See note on these verses in ABC, p. 794.

Reading 44: Micah 3

THE FALSE PROPHET AND THE TRUE

Vv. 1-4 set forth the message of the true prophet. It is one of severe reproof, based on a regard for human welfare and a keen sense of justice, both springing from a clear vision of God as the righteous Judge, the guardian of human rights. The source of the power of the true prophet appears in v. 8: he speaks as inspired by Jehovah and therefore he sees the world just as it is seen by the pure eyes of God. The oppression of the weak by the rich and powerful

appears in all its sordid and brutal inhumanity. Notice the appalling picture of the cannibal feast in vv. 2-3. The true prophet sees life as it really is, and dares to speak the truth

in the name and in the power of God.

The false prophet has a message which comforts and soothes (v. 5). He tells the wealthy and respectable what they want to hear. He does this because he is well fed for his flattering promises of peace. Those who do not feast him, he denounces. The true prophet sees things as they look to God; the false prophet sees them as they look to a greedy man, anxious to make the most he can for himself. Hence there can be no vision for him (vv. 6-7). The false prophets are churchmen whose only care is for their own comfortable living (v. 11), Church and state alike are ruled by a greed which knows no restraint, which has even made God in its own image, and created a religion which acts on the national conscience as a drug (vv. 9-11). V. 12 has the power of a thunderbolt; see the note on it in ABC, p. 795.

Reading 45: Micah 4-5

THE HOPE OF ISRAEL

In these chapters we have a series of prophecies which sum up the faith by which Israel lived through the dark

days of defeat, conquest, and exile.

The great passage, 4:1-5, is gloriously familiar. It is interesting to notice how much it was loved in ancient Israel. It appears in the book of Isaiah (2:2-4), and some of its phrases are repeated again and again. "In the latter days"—how much of the patience of hope is wrapped up in those words! "And peoples shall flow unto it": here is the great vision of a world-wide religion centering in the Holy City (vv. 2-3). V. 5 breathes the fidelity of Israel in the face of an unbelieving world. The strong faith in the redemption of the nation, even though disaster may sweep over her, speaks in vv. 6-8.

In 4:9-5:1 the tragedy of Israel's suffering finds pathetic but not despairing expression. Another picture of the restoration of the stricken nation is seen in 5:2-4. A prince of the family of David is to re-establish the kingdom in Israel. V. 2 is familiar from its quotation in Mt. 2:6. This alternation of shadow and sunshine is quite characteristic of the Hebrew Scripture. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." (Psa. 30:5-A.V.) What would have happened to the hard-pressed race had it not been stayed by this unconquerable hope? What was the secret of that hope?

There is a change of tone in 5:5, which should begin a new paragraph. In vv. 5-13 militant Israel triumphs over her enemies. Some scholars read in this an expression of the warlike spirit of the Maccabean age. But in the Hebrews the warlike spirit was by no means confined to the Mac-

cabean age.

As we have them, then, these two chapters run the whole range of the prophetic outlook, from the world-wide outlook of 4:1-5 to the determined refusal to be swallowed up among the nations, the hope of a return of the power and glory of David's kingdom in a son of his greater far than he, and the assurance that the arrogant enemies of the chosen people will themselves know the pangs of defeat and ruin. Every one of these ways of thinking has been spiritualized in Christian thought—and every one of them could be so spiritualized because at the root of every prophetic idea is the vision of the reality and justice of God. It was Paul who said, "It is a righteous thing with God to recompense affliction to them that afflict you, and to you that are afflicted rest" (2 Thess. 1:6-7).

Reading 46: Micah 6-7

THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE LORD

Mic. 6:1-8 sums up the central teaching of the prophets. Notice the dramatic form in which the prophet puts his

message. What is the scene of the drama (vv. 2-3)? What is the tone of vv. 3-5? To what does the Lord appeal? On what ground does he reproach Israel? What does the reply of the people (vv. 6-7) show as to their idea of the demands of religion? Is there any survival of this idea in modern times? The prophet answers for the Lord in v. 8. Note that "to walk humbly witl. thy God" is the climax of the verse. What is the meaning of this? (The prophets were always

religious teachers, never moralists alone.)

Read 6:9-7:20 as a commentary on 6:1-8. "To do justly" is made concrete and definite by an attack on what the prophet regards as outrageous injustice. Note 6:10-12; 7:3, 5-6: dishonesty in trade, greed and bribery in politics, treachery and dissension in neighborhoods and families are sins against justice (righteousness). They are also sins against mercy (kindness, goodness of heart, gracious generosity). Humílity before God is beautifully illustrated in 7:7-9. The concluding passage, 7.18-20, shows how the humble walk with God is the way of faith. V. 20 is a noble and fitting conclusion to these chapters and to the whole book.

Written Work.—Write a brief paper on one of the following topics:

1. Mic. 1 as a prophet's judgment on a struggle for na-

tional freedom.

2. "Preaching to the Unawakened Conscience," basing your discussion on Mic. 2.

3. The message of Mic. 6:1-8 as applied to the modern

church.

VII

NAHUM, HABAKKUK AND ZEPHANIAH

THERE are two reasons for reading these three prophets together. The first is the fact that they lived at about the same period of their people's history, the latter part of the seventh century B.C. For a brief outline of the events of that time, read the introductory paragraphs in the commentaries on these books in ABC, pp. 798-99, 804-5, 809-11. as well as the section headed "From Hezekiah to Josiah," pp. 68-69. It was the era of the decline and fall of the Assyrian Empire, long the dreaded overlord of the world as the Hebrews knew it. The destruction of Assyria's capital city, Nineveh, in 612 B.C., was apparently preceded by an attempt of Egypt to bolster up the decaying empire as a means of self-defense against the rising power of Babylon. Then when the Babylonians sacked Nineveh the Egyptians tried to hold Syria against them, and only when they were completely overthrown was the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, undisputed master of all western Asia. The turmoil of these terrible years sounds in all three of the books we are now to read.

The second reason for taking them together is that they represent three different ways of looking at the same general situation. Each book is the work of a prophet—which means that in each of them the history of the times is regarded as the working out of the will of Jehovah. But beginning with the same religious conviction and applying it to the same

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state of affairs, these three prophets produced very different lines of teaching. By reading them together we can see the comparison between these three ways of applying religious ideas to the interpretation of the events of history.

Reading 47: Nahum 1:2–2:2 THE LORD'S ARM MADE BARE

This is a psalm, thought by many to be later than Nahum, an addition to his work. However that may be, it fits in with the rest of the book and should be read with it.

It begins (vv. 2-8) with a description of the power and justice of Jehovah which is crowned by a grateful reminder that in the God of Israel power and justice are linked with mercy and goodness. Note that 1:2-3 suggests Longfellow's line: "Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small." Vv. 4-6 show skillful choice of figures of speech to express and emphasize the irresistible might of Jehovah. The vast ocean itself is dried up, the lush pastures of Bashan are withered, even the proud forests of Lebanon languish, while the mountains are shaken, the hills are melted, and the very earth is uphcaved by the power of this mighty God. But in vv. 7-8 the power of Jehovah is seen as exercised in the gracious protection of those who turn to him in time of storm, and in the utter destruction of the falsehearted who dare to defy him.

By a natural transition, vv. 9-14 are devoted to setting forth the folly and wickedness of such defiance. It is foolish, for Jehovah needs to strike but once (vv. 9-10). No earthly power, however great, can withstand him (vv. 11-13). But note: it is for the sake of the afflicted that the Lord strikes down the proud; the tyrant who plots against his weaker neighbors is matching himself against the power of God (vv. 12b-13). In v. 14 is the final sentence of Jehovah against the oppressor and his false gods. The psalm concludes with the promise of Jehovah that the downfall of

the tyrant means security and peace for Israel (1:15-2:2).

As we shall see, Nahum's attention is centered on the ruin of Assyria, the cruel and brutal devourer of her weaker neighbors. In the psalm we are now reading there is no mention of the robber nation by name. But there is a strong and vivid expression of a general principle of Jehovah's rule. Thus always and everywhere are tyrants doomed to destruction: "Jehovah is a jealous God and avengeth" (1:2). But also he restores those who have been trodden down by the oppressor: "Jehovah is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble" (1:7). The book of Nahum is no mere cry of joy over the ruin of Israel's enemy. It is a hymn of praise for a great manifestation of the power and justice and mercy of the true God.

Reading 48: Nahum 2:3–3:19 THE DOWNFALL OF THE TYRANT CITY

In this section of the book we have a vivid description of the capture and sack of Nineveh as it looked to one of the peoples who had been the victims of the Assyrian lust for conquest. We are told, also, why to a prophet of God this great catastrophe appeared as a judgment of Jehovah. In 2:3-7 we have a picture of the final battle for Nineveh. The imperial city does not fall without a struggle; her warriors go down fighting. But she is doomed and must perish (2:6-7. 13; 3:4). The wild scenes of plunder and massacre in the streets of the conquered city are described with the touch of a master in 2:8-10; 3:8-13. The tables are turned now: the lion's den is being raided (2:11-13). The onetime hunters are being hunted. Over all the tumult is heard the exultant outcry of the nations who have suffered at the hands of the fallen tyrant (3:19). The masters of Nineveh in her great days may have thought of their city as a great center of civilization. But it was a civilization based on the ruthless conquest of the little nations, and now her victims rejoice over the wreck of all this pomp and power as a de-

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liverance from a monster of evil. There is a lesson here for all the nations who boast of their greatness. How do we look to the little peoples of the earth? How would they greet our downfall?

But Nahum is not simply a nationalist exulting over the ruin of Israel's enemy. He is a prophet, with a prophet's deep conviction that the power of God is ruling in all the turmoil of history. To him this is what gives meaning to life. The real explanation of the final destruction of the once invincible empire is the decree of an outraged God (3:16.18). It is a special case of the general Law set forth in 1:2-2:2. See 2:13: 3:5-7. But what are the sins for which Nineveh is now doomed? See 3:1, 4, 19. The central thought is in 3:4: Assyria has degraded the nations upon whom she has preyed, even as a harlot makes her lovers a mere means of gain, tricking them and destroying them body and soul. Assyria has made merchandise of the little nations, turning them into mere chattels. The righteousness of God demands respect for the dignity of humanity; any power which treats human beings as tools or means of profit is doomed to destruction.

In An Introduction to the Books of the O.T., by W. O. E. Oesterley and T. H. Robinson, it is well said that these chapters in Nahum may be read as a commentary on Isa. 10:5-15. It is remarked also that Nahum's style "shows him to have been gifted with a vivid imagination and an extraordinary power of expression. No writer in the O.T. suffers so much in translation; his vigor defies reproduction in any language." Reading in one of the modern translations is rewarding for the comparison with the standard versions.

Reading 49: Habakkuk 1:1-2:4 BRUTE FORCE AND A RIGHTEOUS GOD

Only a very few years at most could have separated the working time of Habakkuk from that of Nahum. They

looked at the same world. But Habakkuk's attention is caught less by the fall of Assyria than by the fact that its conqueror, Babylon, was a power which had many of the very characteristics which had made Assyria universally hated. Unlike Nahum, he sees no deliverance for Israel but only a change of masters, no triumph of righteousness but only the victory of one brutal tyranny over another (1: 5-11).

But he is like Nahum in being a prophet. He, too, looks at the world as ruled by God. Hence for him the events of current history raise a question—a great question which thoughtful men in every age have been asking, as they are asking it now. How can a world like this be governed by a good God (1:12-17)? George Adam Smith, in Vol. II of The Book of the Twelve Prophets, heads his discussion of this passage "The Prophet as Sceptic." Habakkuk, he says, "complains to God, asks questions and expostulates. This is the beginning of speculation in Israel." It is to be noted, however, that Habakkuk never loses faith in God. He is a questioner but hardly a sceptic. The very reason why the cruelty, pride, and materialism of the Chaldean conquerors raise a problem in his mind is his firm belief in the reality and righteousness of Jehovah (1:2-4, 12-13).

One answer to Habakkuk's question comes from the preaching of the prophets who had preceded him. The Chaldeans are being raised up as a punishment for Judah's sin (1:5-11). But that does not satisfy him. Can such cruel and godless conquerors as these be the instruments of a good God (1:12-13)? Vv. 14-17 describe the outrageous inhumanity of these monsters. In vv. 15-17 is a description of the way in which the conqueror has lost all sense of proportion and so completely trusts in the material instruments of his power that they may be said to be his gods. See 1:11: "He whose might is his god." Can a good God let loose on the earth such utterly brutal forces as these?

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In 2:1 the spirit of the prophet's questioning finds utterance. His thought centers in God, and his speculation is really a meditation in which he opens his soul to the coming of the divine Word. Vv. 2-4 give us that divine answer. Let the inquirer have patience. He is reading only part of the record. In God's good time his plan and purpose will be made clear. Meanwhile the good man lives on through the darkest hour sustained by his loyalty to the truth. He knows that, whatever happens, goodness and truth are real, and living for them is always worth while. Note the comparison in 2:4 between the man who lives by his loyalty to the unseen things of the spirit and those who deceive themselves into a reliance on the visible things of the material world. The comparison is extended in the following verses.

The latter half of 2:4 is quoted—and adapted—by Paul in Rom. 1:17, Gal. 3:11. Luther made it the watchword of the

Reformation.

Reading 50: Habakkuk 2:5-20

TYRANNY WORKING ITS OWN RUIN

This passage is a collection of taunts against tyrants in which the folly of their ways as leading to certain self-destruction is brilliantly and remorselessly pointed out (2: 6). In v. 8 the hatred which the tyrant arouses is seen as leading to a terrible vengeance when the "remnants" of the many plundered peoples unite to destroy the conquerors whose cruelties have driven their victims to desperation. Note the force of vv. 9-11 and the way in which the main thought of the passage is reinforced. The palace built by injustice tells not of its builder's greatness but of his shame; the very material of which it is made cries out against him. In vv. 13-14 the cause of this inevitable recoil of evil upon the evildoer is traced to Jehovah, who is thus teaching all the world the lesson of his reality and power and justice. The figure of speech in vv. 15-17 is particularly impressive; the same cup of fury which the oppressor makes his victims

drink will be held to his own lips by the mighty hand of

Jehovah.

This passage may be read as a commentary on 2:2-3. We have only to wait. The pride of the brutal conqueror goes before a divinely ordained fall. The final answer to the prophet's question is in 2:20. But it is an answer only for him who has faced life's great questions, and in facing them has found that God is real and his goodness is everlasting, even though his ways are past finding out.

Reading 51: Zephaniah 1:2-18

NATIONAL SIN AND WORLD REVOLUTION

Zephaniah, like Nahum, foresees the ruin of Assyria (2: 13-15). Like Habakkuk, he sees that the forces at work in the world revolution going on about him are cruel and material. But he does not exult over the fall of Assyria, nor is he moved to seek an answer to the problem raised by God's use of evil nations as the executioners of his judgment. His attention, as a prophet with a clear vision of the nature and reality of God, is centered on the life of his nation; and the evils which he sees there convince him that the general upheaval of the world means the coming of Jehovah in judgment upon the sins of his chosen race.

Notice the things which seem to Zephaniah to call down the vengeance of Jehovah—the idolatrous worship which had been brought in by Manasseh (vv. 4-5; see 2 Kings 21:1-9), the neglect of the worship of the true God (v. 6), the foolish aping of foreign customs (v. 8), deceit and violence among the king's ministers (v. 9), insolent defiance

of God and his power (v. 12).

The picture of the dark day of the divine judgment in vv. 14-18 is vivid and terrible. It is Zephaniah's way of saying that the Lord God will make no compromise with evil, will accept no substitute for righteousness, that nothing else can stand before him. It emphasizes also the prophet's conviction that, though human powers may exalt them-

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selves, still the real governing force in history is divine, and the final outcome of all the great upheavals is the judgment of God on human sin and folly.

Reading 52: Zephaniah 3 SIN, JUDGMENT, AND SALVATION

This chapter falls into three sections. Vv. 1-7 are a denunciation of the perverse and stubborn sinfulness of Jerusalem. (Characteristic of Zephaniah's outlook is the fact that for him "the oppressing city" is not Nineveh but Jerusalem.) She has rejected the true God, her rulers and her judges are like beasts of prey in the inhumanity of their greed, and her religious leadership is false (vv. 1-4)—this in spite of the fact that she has had the revelation of Jehovah's justice and has seen that justice executed on the nations round about her (vv. 5-7). All in vain—nothing has checked the headlong folly of the nation's evil course.

Vv. 8-13 draw the lesson. The great day of Jehovah's final judgment is at hand. It is a universal outpouring of his wrath (v. 8). In ch. 2 the prophet has already emphasized the world-wide scope of the divine punishment. For Jerusalem, however, it is punishment and not destruction, a purging of the guilt which has defiled her (vv. 11-13). Those who are now despised and oppressed by the proud evildoers will dwell in peace. Notice in v. 9 a reference to the extension of Jehovah's salvation to all the nations.

Vv. 14-20 are a song of praise for the divine deliverance of Jerusalem. This is much less a matter of the defeat of her enemies than of the purification of her religion. Her God will dwell in her midst. Thus the message of Zephaniah ends with a note of hope. The day of Jehovah dawns in threatening clouds, and the threat is not empty. But the noon will be radiant and the day will be bright for those who are faithful to the true God.

In 1945 a deeply religious man might have seen the world situation principally as a vindication of the moral Law of God in the downfall of Nazi and Japanese tyranny as both inhuman and irreligious. But another equally religiousminded student of current history might have been appalled at the cruelty of the means employed in the defeat of Germany and Japan, or he might have criticized the character and actions of some of our allies. The hideous suffering involved in the war against tyranny might have seemed to him the most prominent feature in the whole situation. And thus he might have seen a new and terrible putting of the whole problem of evil; he would have echoed the question of Habakkuk (1:13): "Thou that art of purer eyes than to behold evil, . . . wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously?" How can one set of cruelties cancel another? Still a third interpreter might sorrowfully have confessed the sins of America, and seen in this world conflict the judgment of God upon us for our selfish attempts to isolate ourselves from the rest of mankind. He might have had faith to see God's purging discipline bringing nearer the coming of his kingdom in all the world, with a chastened America as his loval servant. Perhaps in the three prophets we have been reading we have inspired examples of three ways of looking at history, each of them the expression of a great vision of the ways of God with men.

Written Work.—Apply one of these prophetic views to the problem of the relation of America as a great power to the weaker nations of the world. We have seen the complete downfall of two great tyrant nations in the defeat of Germany and Japan. Now we face the task of rebuilding the world. What can we learn from the prophets as we take up this work and, isolation no longer thinkable, assume our place as one of the "Big Three," upon whom rests the chief responsibility for a wise and unselfish leadership of mankind?

VIII JEREMIAH

OF ALL the prophets, Jeremiah is perhaps the most interesting as a man. For one thing, we know more about the details of his life than we know in the case of any other prophet, not even excepting Isaiah. For another, he tells us about his inner life, the "fears within" that beset him in the course of his long and stormy career. Besides all this. his prophetic work marks a high point in the process by which the religion of Israel became the religion of the Israelite, the religion of the nation became the religion of the individual. Dr. John Skinner in his book on Jeremiah, which he calls Prophecy and Religion, says (pp. 14-15): "We can see that the final mission of prophecy was to liberate the eternal truths of religion from their temporary national embodiment, and disclose their true foundation in the immutable character of God and the essential nature of man. We shall see how this process culminated in Jeremiah.' This might be summed up by saying that to Jeremiah was revealed, in his own experience, the truth that religion is a direct and inner relation between God and the individual man, and that this is true because God is the kind of Being that he is and man is the kind of creature he is. Temporary circumstances and historical situations affect the way in which this religious relationship works itself out, but they do not and cannot affect its essential, basic nature. God is God and man is man, wherever and

whenever they meet; and that meeting is the essence of

religion.

Read carefully the introduction to the commentary on Jeremiah in ABC, pp. 628-40. See also, on pages 68-70, the sections headed "From Hezekiah to Josiah" and "Fall of Judah." It is especially important in the reading of Jeremiah that the changes in the circumstances of the Kingdom of Judah be kept in mind. Those changes were many in the time of this prophet, and they came with bewildering quickness. Of course the religious conditions of the time should also be studied. Against the prevailing ideas and practices of the religion of his people Jeremiah protested with all his might, and we cannot hope fully to understand his protests unless we know what called them forth.

The book of Jeremiah contains several elements. The outline given by R. H. Pfeiffer (Introduction to the O. T., pp. 482-87) is useful as a guide. Here are its main headings:

1. The Words of Jeremiah: chs. 1-25. By this Pfeiffer

means the direct prophetic utterances of the prophet.

2. The Biography of Jeremiah: chs. 26-45. This is the work of the prophet's friend and disciple, Baruch.

3. Oracles Against Foreign Nations: chs. 46-51.

4. A Historical Appendix: ch. 52.

It must be noted, however, that the first section, "The Words of Jeremiah," includes autobiographical material. Some of this is in the form of revelations of the prophet's own inner struggle, which, while they give us some of his deepest prophetic insights, would hardly have been a matter for public preaching. On the other hand, Baruch's memoirs contain, as they naturally would, a considerable body of prophetic material.

Reading 53: Jeremiah 1:4-19 JEREMIAH'S CALL

It is interesting to compare this passage with Isa. 6 and Ezek. 1:1-3:15, in which other prophetic calls are described.

Perhaps Amos 7:14-15 might also be read with this comparison in mind. Many commentators remark on the comparatively plain and simple way in which Jeremiah tells of his commission. One of them, A. S. Peake, says: "The narrative gains an effectiveness of its own by the very absence of accessories. God and the man are here alone in intimate conversation." Thus at the very beginning of the book we hear the note of the directness of the relation between the individual and God which is sounded throughout.

The call comes with a sense of irresistible compulsion, and here Jeremiah's experience is typical (see Amos 3:8; Ezek. 3:14; 1 Cor. 9:16). Our Lord himself seems to have felt it (Lk. 12:49-50). Jeremiah, indeed, is deeply convinced that his prophetic mission is part of a divine purpose for his life which was formed before his birth. To his work as a prophet he was predestined by God (v. 5). His call is only the revelation of the work for which he was called into existence (cf. Gal. 1:15-16).

Notice, however, that in spite of this Jeremiah feels keenly his own unfitness. This, again, is found in many of the great men of the Bible (see Ex. 3:11; 4:1, 10; Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; 2:1). While Jeremiah feels profoundly that he is divinely predestined for his task, his sense of his unfitness is also strong (v. 6). Perhaps this makes him all the greater as a prophet, for thus he is completely dependent on God (vv. 7-10, 17-19; cf. Ex. 3:12; Isa. 6:6-8; Ezek. 2:3-7; 2 Cor. 12:7-10). The power of the prophet is not his own.

V. 10 is surely interesting. The prophet's message is not for Judah only—compare the latter part of v. 5. Notice also that his message has something to do with the ultimate destiny of those who hear it, and even of those who do not. It sets up a standard by which the nations are to be judged. As they measure up to it or fail to do so, they stand or fall. With the proclamation of this standard a new power comes into the world. Does it seem strange for this young man, a

member of one of the lesser nations of his time, to be harboring ideas like this? How well has history justified him?

Vv. 11-14 show us the inspired mind in action. For such a mind common things blaze with a great meaning. This is characteristic of the prophets (see Amos 2:13; 3:5; 7:1, 4, 7; Hos. 7:6; 8:7; 10:1, 4, 12; 13:3; Isa. 1:3, 8; 5:1-7; 7:4; 10:14; 28:16-17, 20). Fortunate is the preacher who can share in some measure this prophetic power and thus find himself and lead his congregation to find

tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.

Our Reading ends with a truly heroic picture of the one lone man standing invincibly against the world. One man, however weak he may be, is in the unconquerable majority if he speaks for God. Says George Adam Smith: "Here at the beginning of his ministry Jeremiah has forced upon him the separateness, the awful responsibility, the power of the Single Soul."

Jeremiah is more keenly conscious than the other prophets of the inner conflict between the man and the prophet. As a man he is retiring, gentle, even timid, certainly lacking in assertive self-confidence. This is the man who is called to defy his whole generation, to undertake a task which would test the powers of the strongest and try the courage of the hardiest and most self-reliant. But he is also conscious of God entering into the conflicts of his heart, meeting his questions, calming his fears, giving him strength for weakness. It is this which makes Jeremiah the great prophet of the religion of the inner life.

Reading 54: Jeremiah 2:1–3:5 THE FOLLY OF FAITHLESSNESS

This is a sermon addressed to a nation which has turned its back on the true God of its fathers and taken instead

the false gods and the corrupt and immoral worship of Canaan (2:7-8, 20-25). Jeremiah emphasizes the mad folly of this as well as its wretchedness and ingratitude (2:4-8, 13, 20-25).

The sermon begins by a tender and moving description of the ancient faith of Israel and the happiness which it brought. The days when the chosen people wandered in the wilderness were days of rejoicing in a new-found liberty, when all the hardships of desert life were borne in cheerful loyalty to the great Liberator.

In sad contrast is Israel's life today (2:4-8). The memory of the great days of liberation has faded, and Jehovah's gift of fruitful Canaan has resulted in wholesale corruption of both church and state, universal forgetfulness of the Giver

in the enjoyment of his gifts (v. 8).

The outrageous folly of this conduct is vividly emphasized in vv. 9-13. In the first place, such an act of national faithlessness is an unheard of piece of unnatural vileness (vv. 9-12). It is enough to destroy the peace of the very heavens. In the second place, it is utterly senseless (v. 13). Note the power of the little allegory which is summed up in that verse in one unforgettable sentence. This idea of false religion as outrageously foolish, utterly unreasonable, is taken up again in this chapter (vv. 29-37). Another memorable figure of speech flashes out in v. 32. True religion is only sanctified common sense. False religion is unsanctified folly.

Another aspect of Israel's folly is her reliance on foreign alliances (vv. 14-19). They lead only to her impoverishment (vv. 15-17). The lesson is plain enough, but still the

people do not heed it (vv. 18-19).

Again, the emptiness of idol worship needs no proof. These gods of wood and stone are useless in the very time when help is most needed (vv. 26-28). Then the people come sneaking back to Jehovah like detected thieves. Can

they expect him to help them? Let them go back to the

gods they have chosen!

What is the secret of this wild folly? The prophet tells it in v. 20. Read as in the A.S.V. mg.: "Thou hast broken thy yoke." See note on this verse in ABC, p. 681. The lusts and appetites of the people have mastered them, and they are like wild animals in the complete unreasonableness of their conduct (vv. 23-25). Thus these besotted wretches satisfy every evil impulse, cast aside the wise restraints of the divine rule, and then expect a righteous God to accept them and heal them when they face the results of their folly and sin (vv. 35-37; 3:1-5).

In this passage we have an analysis of the worldly pagan spirit which tries, on the one hand, to enjoy to the full all the pleasures of sin and all the pomp and vanity of this wicked world, and yet, on the other, tries to justify its way as somehow a lofty and noble way of life. We are familiar enough with people who live lives of utter selfishness and yet regard themselves as highly cultured and even virtuous, and quite expect that God will take care of them in times of trouble—the only times in which they pay any attention to him. Jeremiah helps us to see the folly of this and to understand the causes of the

Reading 55: Jeremiah 3:19-4:4 THE WAY OF SALVATION

This passage is addressed to those that truly and earnestly repent of their sins but whose conviction of sin is so deep that they despair of their restoration to the true way of life.

Vv. 19-20 contrast the gracious purpose of God for his people with their attitude to him. Notice how "I said" is repeated. What a beautiful expression of God's invitation to men to become his children! But how callously and cruelly have the people of Israel flouted the divine kindness, how basely have they betrayed his love! This comparison of God's grace with their own vileness is enough for the

people to whom Jeremiah is speaking; the cry of sorrowful repentance is heard at once (v. 21). Then swiftly comes the divine reply: these straying children are welcomed home (v. 22a). The voice of the penitents is heard again in vv. 22b-25. Their false gods have failed them; it is only in Jehovah that there is salvation. But it is too late; they have sinned away their chance of finding their way back to God, and they must resign themselves to the final destruction to which they have doomed themselves.

In 4:1-4 is the answer of Jehovah to this heartbroken cry of despair: there is hope for the contrite heart (vv. 1-2). Let Israel forsake her evil ways and she will find again a true realization of God's saving presence, and find in him her true reliance; by him shall she swear. Her rediscovery of true religion not only will mean her own restoration but will bring a blessing to all the earth. The repentant sinner will lead others to repentance (cf. Psa. 51:13). But repentance must be deep and genuine. There must be a real change of heart as the necessary condition of salvation (4:3-4).

Jeremiah is convinced that if only his people can see the loving-kindness of God, realize how gracious is his purpose for them, the vileness of their own sin will break their hearts. He is sure that once they come to the place of true penitence they will be taken back to their place in the divine family. But it must be true penitence, a deep conviction of the exceeding sinfulness of sin which means an agony of soul from which only the assurance of God's loving voice can deliver the penitent.

Reading 56: Jeremiah 4:5-31

THE DAY OF DOOM

This passage is notable for the force and brillance of its repeated descriptions of approaching doom. No doubt Jeremiah is speaking of an actual threat to Judah by some mighty invader. Perhaps the hosts of newly revitalized Babylon are in his mind and in the minds of those

who listen to him. The fears of a terrified nation, one of the little nations confronted with a great and ruthless enemy, cry out in these lines. Nor is the prophet standing aloof in cool detachment; notice v. 19, in which he speaks for the people in the first person as one who fully shares the prevailing anguish.

But Jeremiah speaks as a prophet, not merely as a citizen or a patriot. All through this passage there rings the conviction that the peril of Jerusalem is due to her moral and religious weakness rather than to the power of her enemy (vv. 14-18, 22). Beyond and above the menace of the savage enemy the prophet sees the awful judgment of Jehovah (vv. 7, 13, 23-28). Compare v. 23 with Gen. 1:2-3. The process of creation is being reversed. In the marching hosts of Judah's human enemies Jeremiah sees the instruments of Jehovah's wrath, and their coming is only the prelude to the destruction of the world itself in the coming final judgment of God.

The prediction of Jeremiah that the particular world crisis which he faced meant the coming of Jehovah's final judgment at the end of the world was not fulfilled. But his conviction that the history of the nations was no mere endless and aimless turmoil remained unshaken. Above the wild riot of bloodshed and destruction, which men in their blindness were stirring up, stood God, working out his eternal purpose, making even the wrath of man to praise him, rendering to all men according to their works. Irresistibly he was bringing on the full revelation of his will in human history in a final destruction of evil and enthronement of righteousness. That faith remains as one of the foundation principles of true religion, giving dignity to human life and a high responsibility to those who take any part at all in the guidance of human affairs. About the detailed application of this principle we may well go with reverent caution. There may be more than one day of God's judgment. But we know that the foundation of God

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standeth sure, and that this faith of Jeremiah's should still be ours.

Reading 57: Jeremiah 5:1-13, 23-31; 6:10-15 THE CORRUPTION OF A NATION

These chapters are devoted to a rebuke of Judah's evil ways and a prediction of her punishment by Jehovah through foreign conquerors. It can hardly be said that there is anything here which cannot be found in other prophets; but Jeremiah does set forth with unusual power the various elements in the decay of national life, and we may read these chapters to see what these elements are.

The prophet begins by a forcible exposure of the decay of individual character. Where are the men who by their straightforwardness in thought and action give tone and worth to a city's life? Search as he may, the prophet can find none (5:1). Then he turns to the decay of religion. Professions of piety are belied by the lives of those who make them (5:2). Then there is a national failure to understand the true meaning of events which are taking place in the life of the nation and in the world about it. Misfortune and disaster, in which the prophet clearly sees the chastening of the Lord, are disregarded. The nation blindly persists in the very ways which have brought evil (5:3). Nor is there any hope in the great men who have been given full opportunities for clear knowledge; they completely disregard the demands of truth and righteousness (5:4-5). False religion and a collapse of morals are driving the nation farther and farther into utter and hopeless ruin (5:6-9, 25-29). In vv. 30-31 the self-satisfied corruption of Jerusalem is pictured in all its horrifying baseness. False prophets and false priests are joyfully accepted by a besotted nation. The warnings of the true prophets are scoffed at (5:12-13).

Jer. 6:10 is a description of the inner corruption of the

individual which is the root of the corruption of the nation. It is an inner hardening of the heart which makes repentance impossible and the voice of true religion only a burden and an annoyance. Then in v. 13 the prophet denounces the corroding evil of a greed for things which cheapens the whole life of a nation, making of religion itself a means of gain. In vv. 14-15 the blind optimism of false leadership is traced to its origin in a withered conscience which makes it impossible for a man to see straight. Self-satisfied sinners cannot read aright the signs of the times.

We can well afford to take Jeremiah's analysis of the decay of ancient Judah and apply it point by point to our own day and generation. What kind of leadership are we producing? How strenuously moral is our religion? How much tenderness of conscience is to be found in the America of today? How much value do we put on things, and how much on the truth of God? How clearly do we discern the hand of God in the events of history? Unless we ask such questions as these there really is little point to reading the prophets.

Reading 58: Jeremiah 7:1-15; 26:8-19 NO PLACE IS HOLY FOR UNHOLY MEN

Almost certainly these two chapters refer to the same occasion. In ch. 7 there is a fuller account of the words of Jeremiah; ch. 26 has more to do with the description of the scene and the results of the prophet's action. Ch. 7 is in the section classified by Pfeiffer as "the words of Jeremiah"; ch. 26 is among the biographical passages. To understand these chapters, we must keep the historical situation clearly in mind; use your imagination to picture the prophet standing in the outer court of the Temple, the fury of the priests and the prophets (the religious leaders of Judah), and the extreme danger in which Jeremiah was putting himself. See notes in ABC, pp. 685, 695.

Note the emphasis on the divine command in 7:1-2 It is not a message of his own contriving that Jeremiah is to deliver. The prophet is to place himself at the entrance to the Temple and is to speak in the name of God to religious people on their way to worship.

The message is a message of doom, but note that the doom is conditional—"if." The condition is moral, a reform not of ritual only but of life (7:5-11). This demand of the Lord cannot be evaded. Unless it is met the Temple itself will perish as utterly as had that ancient sanctuary at Shiloh.

Jer. 26:8-19 describes the immediate result to Jeremiah of his daring words. Note the fury of the religious leaders, the priests who minister in the Temple, and also the prophets, the successors of Isaiah (vv. 8-11). Here is a study in the swift degeneration of the ministers of religion. Not very long before, this Temple had been cleansed of Canaanite abominations by a crusade in which priests and prophets had joined (2 Kings 23). Now priests and prophets have fallen victim to the delusion that correct forms of worship are all-sufficient. "Time makes ancient good uncouth"and it does not take a long time, either! Notice that Jeremiah owes his life to the lavmen who are leaders in the state, not to the churchmen. How have the laymen escaped the contagion of blind faith in holy places and holy forms as having power in themselves, apart from the character of the people who worshiped in the shrines and observe the sacred forms?

Is this foolish and blind reliance on forms and places as valuable in themselves apart from the spirit in which they are used a danger to which the official ministers of religion are especially open? How does Jeremiah escape it? Notice how completely he regards it as the ruin of true religion (7:8-15).

These chapters assert the prophetic conviction that the worth of all visible forms or symbols in religious worship depends on the way in which the religion symbolized makes

itself felt in the lives of those who use the forms. Notice how this principle is emphasized by every one of the great prophets. See how Jesus himself insists upon it again and again. Mt. 7:15-27 is only one example of our Lord's teaching on this point. How sharply does he draw the line between true and false worship! Certainly no Christian can regard the teaching of the prophets as having no value for our day as far as this matter is concerned.

Reading 59: Jeremiah 8:4-9:1 SIN AS UNNATURAL FOLLY

The text of the sermon is in vv. 4-7. Notice the figures of speech, all examples of abnormal and unnatural action. A man falling down and refusing to get up again; a traveler mistaking his turn and then persisting in following the wrong road; people who continually slip backwards and appear to enjoy it; a runaway horse, maddened by the turmoil of battle-these are all abnormal, and Judah's behavior is likened to them. On the other hand, the homing instinct of the birds, deeply rooted in their nature, is obeyed always and everywhere; and this normal behavior is contrasted with that of the chosen people. Judah is disobeying the natural calling to God and his service. Godliness is natural; sin is unnatural. Yet sin is everywhere. Compare the famous saying of Augustine: "O God, thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee." What strikes Jeremiah is the mad persistence of the sinner in turning away from his true refuge, away from the presence of God to the turmoil of homelessness and exile.

In vv. 8-12 the prophet analyzes the way in which sinful people justify themselves and stifle the voice of conscience. They find false teachers who twist the Law of God to suit their own whims—the folly of it, to turn from true leadership to false, from real wisdom to vanity! Vv. 10-12 are repeated from 6:12-15.

The wages of sin are described in vv. 13-17. Within this 90

passage, vv. 14-16 picture the dreadful disillusionment of those who take the wrong way and persist in following it until finally they come to the place where there is nothing left to do but to sit still and await the coming of the invader whom they cannot hope to resist. This is the judgment of Jehovah, and now at last, and too late, they know it (v. 17).

But Jeremiah is a man and an Israelite as well as a prophet. He cannot look on the unnatural and ultimately fatal state of the life of his people without the most poignant sorrow. This passage (8:18-9:1) and others like it have led to the description of Jeremiah as the weeping prophet. His sorrow is due partly to his clear realization that the wages of sin is indeed death (vv. 19-21). V. 19 seems to foresee the dreary days of the Exile; compare Psa. 137. It is partly due also to his own feeling of helplessness, his failure to bring healing to his stricken people (v. 22). It is all so needless; the great Physician is at hand, but the people will not turn to him. Against the unnatural and perverse folly of Judah the prophet can do nothing. Of Jer. 9:1, A. S. Peake remarks: "The division here is very unfortunate: the Hebrew division according to which this verse closes the eighth chapter is correct. With this passionate outburst of sorrow the noble lament of the prophet reaches its worthy climax."

Written Work.-Write on one of the following:

1. A comparison of the call of Jeremiah with that of Isaiah. Jer 1:4-19; Isa. 6.

2. The neglect of religion as sheer folly. Readings 54, 59.

3. What makes a church a house of God? Reading 58.

Reading 60: Jeremiah 9:2-24 THE CITY OF DECEPTION

The first section of this sermon is a lament of the prophet over his lot—doomed to dwell amid a generation of evildoers. Better the bare walls of a desert inn, the camping

place of travelers for a night, than the life of Jerusalem with all its creature comforts, but with all its treachery and utter lack of sincerity and good faith. The great city is filled with power, it has the energy and the skill to achieve anything and everything—everything but the discovery of truth and obcdience to it (v. 3)! Spiritual goods are at a discount. What a picture of a godless civilization, rich in things but poor in real manhood! The fruit of hard self-seeking is a withered brotherhood (vv. 4-5). The last clause of v. 5 is blistering in its irony—people who wear themselves out in robbing and deceiving their neighbors! Jerusalem is a city of deception, a self-deception that blinds its inhabitants to the presence of Jehovah (v. 6). The final penalty of deceit is an inability to know the truth.

In the second section (vv. 7-16) the prophet sees the city of deception as it looks to Jehovah. Jerusalem may deceive herself and her people, but she cannot deceive God. The wages of sin is death, and the treachery with which the life of Jerusalem is riddled is a deadly offense to the God of truth. The proud city will be a ruin inhabited only by jackals, while its people will pay the penalty for their besotted folly in an exile in which they will perish (vv. 11-16).

The third section (vv. 17-22) pictures with terrible vividness the destruction of Jerusalem. Professional mourners are called to sing a dirge for a city dying in torment. Death comes as a reaper; and, as he passes, the bodies of men are left to rot upon the earth (vv. 21-22).

Finally, the prophet turns by way of contrast to a picture of the city of truth (vv. 23-24). Here men glory, not in their wisdom, nor in their power, nor in their wealth, but in their knowledge and understanding of God and his righteousness. This is an especially fine passage. Compare Mt. 6:33 and 1 John 2:17.

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Reading 61: Jeremiah 13:1-14 TWO PARABLES OF JUDGMENT

Here are two little parables taken from common things. A linen belt marred by damp, a row of wine bottles waiting to be filled, these are taken by Jeremiah as figures of religious and moral truth. Jeremiah is like Socrates, who was criticized for illustrating his discourses by references to the trifling things of everyday life. A greater than either spoke in parables of sowing and reaping, house building and breadmaking, stray sheep, and bushel measures.

The parable of the soiled girdle deals with a good thing misused and thus made good for nothing. Notice in v. 11 the application to the proper destiny of Judah as the people chosen by God to be his close companion. The loss of this magnificent opportunity is due to the willful refusal of the nation to heed the divine call (v. 10 and the last clause of v. 11). They have given themselves to the service of base and unworthy gods and by this misuse of opportunity have brought on themselves complete and utter ruin.

The parable of the wine jars is a warning to self-confident people who are rejoicing in their prosperity as assured and unassailable. Just as surely as each of the row of waiting wine jars will be filled with wine, so will all these selfconfident men of Judah be filled with prosperity. But Jeremiah carries the figure a bit further. Like wine, prosperity brings drunkenness. In a greedy materialism, and perhaps in the drunkenness and gluttony which result from it. these self-satisfied people will find their own doom. Pride goeth before a fall. The wild orgies of the king and his nobles in their senseless overconfidence are the visitation of God upon them, for sin brings forth sin as its own punishment until in madness the sinners destroy one another as one wine jar crashes against another. "Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad," says a grim old proverb. Jeremiah had something like that in mind here.

Reading 62: Jeremiah 13:20-27

SIN AND SINNING

With this passage should be read Jer. 17:1-4; also 2:22-25; 3:17b; 4:3-4, 14, 18; 5:23; 9:14; 16:12; 17:9.

Jeremiah sees a distinction between sinning, the doing of acts which are wrong in the eyes of God, and sin, which is something far more terrible. For sin is an inner corruption of nature by which the ruling desires of the heart are continually for evil, so that evil becomes the sinner's good, his joy and his delight. He can desire nothing else, and seeks evil so constantly and so naturally that to do anything else is impossible (13:23).

How does this terrible corruption of the heart come about? Notice that Jeremiah does not seem to mean that it is part and parcel of original human nature. Notice 13:23: "that are accustomed to do evil." Jer. 17:1 says that sin is graven on the heart, deeply graven but still not there originally. Sin comes by habit and becomes second nature. Sinning results in sin. This interpretation seems borne out by the prophet's teaching that Judah's rejection of the true God is unnatural (see *Reading* 7). This can mean only that man by his original nature is drawn to God, as a bird by instinct is drawn south in the winter and called back north in the summer. But man's natural religious instincts have been perverted.

Jeremiah's teaching about sin makes it all the more terrible, while sinning becomes indeed the way of death. The establishment of habits is the way in which character is settled. Each individual sin is part of a life, and each tends to shape that life. The wages of sinning is sin, and the wages of sin is death.

Of course this means that salvation is not merely the remission of penalties but a renewing of nature. A sinful heart could not be at home in any heaven in which a righteous God rules.

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Reading 63: Jeremiah 14:1-15:9 UNANSWERED PRAYER

The passage opens with a vivid description of a long-continued drought (vv. 1-6). The people of Judah are moved by their misery to approach Jehovah in prayer (vv. 7-9, 19-22). But he rejects their petition, and even forbids Jeremiah to pray for them (v. 11). Not even though Moses and Samuel interceded for them would he listen (15:1). Far from granting them his favor, he will destroy them (14:15-18; 15:2-9).

Why is the prayer of the people so decisively rejected? Perhaps the answer is to be found in the tone of their prayer. Read again 14:7-9; there is acknowledgment of transgression, to be sure, but isn't there also a rather easy confidence that God can't really be very angry with them? When they actually need him he will not fail them. After all, he is not a stranger to them; they are "called by his name," long acknowledged as his chosen people. The same tone is heard in vv. 19-22. How can Jebovah treat them so? To be sure they have sinned, but still he has promised them his protection, and that by solemn covenant (v. 21). His are the life-giving rains, and they can't believe he will withhold them until it is too late (v. 22).

This all sounds very modern in its calm assumption that the God neglected and disobeyed in times of success and prosperity will always be found ready to help in times of desperate need. Such an assumption is always based on a shallow idea of religion and of prayer, and represents no real longing for God and his service but only a very keen desire for deliverance from trouble. These people of Judah wanted rain; we may feel sure that once the drought broke they would not be long in going back to their own godlessness. Jesus taught his disciples to pray for their daily bread, but the prayer he taught began with a petition for the coming of God's kingdom and for perfect obedience to his

will. This prayer of Judah's remained unanswered because

it lacked the depth of real prayer.

But there is another reason for the failure of this prayer. Read again 14:13-15. A false religious leadership is responsible a cheap and shallow religion, and cheap and shallow religion produces cheap and shallow prayer. In this case it is not "like priest, like people," but "like prophet, like people." The heavy responsibility of those who claim to speak for God is underlined here.

The quality and effectiveness of prayer depend on the quality of the religious life of him who prays. For Jeremiah's idea of true prayer see 3:21-25. Compare Jas. 5:16. This passage is a natural outcome of Jeremiah's keen sense of the necessity for complete and heartfelt realization of the great need of man: not abundant rain and good har-

vests but loyal companionship with God.

Written Work.-Write on one of the following:

1. The real enemy of a nation. Readings 57 and 60.

2. The nature of sin. Reading 62.

3. Ineflectual prayer and its causes. Reading 63.

Reading 64: Jeremiah 16:1-13 THE ISOLATION OF THE PROPHET

Jeremiah's prophetic vision shuts him away from the common life of men. Not for him the joys of marriage and the home (vv. 1-4.) So terrible is the clearness of his vision of national ruin that he cannot be as his fellows who marry and are given in marriage. Even more terrible is the fact that he cannot find it in his heart to join in the lament of those who mourn, for their sorrows seem little when compared with the wholesale ruin which will overwhelm the land; and Jeremiah cannot help making that comparison whenever the cry of sorrow rings in his ears. His tears cannot flow for the dead, for the time is coming when death will be so common as to be unregarded, and corpses will ite

unburied (vv. 5-7). On the other hand, the prophet cannot join in the merrymaking which cheers the daily round, or marks the setting up of a new home. His days are overshadowed by the dreadful vision of a time soon to come when desolation and despair will reign in Jerusalem (vv. 8-9).

Now some such sense of isolation must come to every really prophetic spirit. There is, and there always will be, a sharp and sad distinction between the kingdom of God and the world; and he who sees most clearly the glory of the kingdom will also see the day of its coming as truly a day of judgment. But on the other hand, the prophet's message is to the world, and hence he is joined to it not only by the ties of a human nature which he shares with his fellows but by the bonds of his duty to God as his representative among his people. The prophet is not of this world, but he must still be in it, understanding it and loving it.

Notice that Jeremiah does not accept his isolation with satisfaction. He does not stand aside without concern for the people from whom his prophetic ministry sets him apart. He seeks to bring them over to a share in his own understanding of life; if their complete absorption in the things of the world makes him a stranger to them, still it is not something which cannot be changed. This makes him a true prophet, for he can and he does speak to Israel with the voice of a brother who has never lost his love for the family even though he has been denied a place in its fire-side circle.

Reading 65: Jeremiah 15:10-21

THE PROPHET AND THE MAN

This is perhaps the greatest of a number of passages which reveal the inner life of Jeremiah. The others, which should be read with it, are 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 17:9-10, 14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-12, 14-18. There is nothing quite like them in any

other of the prophetic writings. Says Skinner (in *Prophecy and Religion*, p. 202), they "lay bare the innermost secrets of the prophet's life, his fightings without and fears within, his mental conflict with adversity and doubt and temptation, and the reaction of his whole nature on a world that threatened to crush him and a task which overwhelmed him."

Jeremiah's heart is torn between his natural desires and feelings as a man and the demands of his prophetic office and ministry. He is continually oppressed by the terror of his message to a people he deeply loves. (See 15:18; 20:18; also 4:19-26; 6:11; 7:34; 8:18-22; 9:1; 16:6-9.) He is mocked and hated (15:10; 18:18; 20:7). He is surrounded by treachery (9:3-6; 12:6; 15:15). His life is actually in danger (18:23; 20:10; see also 26:10-19; 36:26; 38:1-13). This man is shunned by all, but, more than that, his own deep conviction of the sin and folly of his time makes it impossible for him to share in the simple joys of the common life which by nature he loves (9:2; 15:17; 16:2, 5, 8). At times he curses the day of his birth (15:10; 20:14-18). He reproaches the God who has laid upon him a ministry which is an unbearable burden, yet a burden which is as inescapable as it is intolerable (12:1; 15:18). Sometimes, forgetting that he is a prophet of a God of love, he calls out with fierce passion for vengeance upon his enemies (11:20; 12:3-4; 15:15; 17:18; 18:21-23; 20:12).

But there is another side to this struggle. The very ministry which at times seems like a burden too heavy to be borne is still the source of a deep joy (15:16; see also 9: 23-24). The God who at times seems like a hard taskmaster is a Friend to whom Jeremiah appeals in humble faith (17:17-18; 18:19-20). At times when he can hardly understand or trust his own heart he takes refuge in the conviction that God can rule for good even that dark and treacherous region of life (10:23-24; 17:9-10).

Many of these passages take the form of a conversation

between the prophet and his God. Jeremiah is assured of the divine protection and of strength as the gift of God (15:11, 21; 20:11; see also 1:9-10, 17-19; 6:27). He is told sternly that the sufferings of the present should prepare him for the greater trials of the future (12:5-6). Finally, in 15: 19-20, comes the command to purge his own heart. Only as he gives himself in unqualified, wholehearted consecration to the will of God can he find the peace and win the victory which he desires. This is one of the high points of O.T. revelation. We are reminded of the words of a Teacher greater than Jeremiah: "The pure in heart . . . shall see God"—where "pure" means unalloyed, unmixed with desires lower than the hunger and thirst after righteousness. "If thou take forth the precious from the vile" (v. 19).

This inner experience of Jeremiah's made him the prophet of an individual communion with God. He has been called "the first of the psalmists." From this inner conflict, at times so bitter, came the healing stream of a consciousness of personal fellowship with the Lord God. Of Jeremiah it may well be said that "passing through the valley of weeping," he made it "a place of springs" (Psa. 84:6).

Reading 66: Jeremiah 17:5-8; 26:10-15; 45 JEREMIAH FINDS PEACE

Bitter and long continued though it was the inner conflict of Jeremiah's life led to peace in the end. The little poem which is included in ch. 17 may be regarded as the prophet's response to the word of the Lord in 15:19-20. It is, of course, the inspiration of the First Psalm. Notice, however, the absence of any mention of the Law in Jeremiah's description of the true man of God. For him the source of blessedness lay in direct fellowship with God. With this read again 9:23-24. The true reason for "glory" is that serene certainty of God as righteous and loving

power which, of course, brings humility and not pride, a

peace "too full for sound and foam."

The noble selflessness of Jeremiah's reply to those who threaten his life because of his fearless preaching in the Temple (26:10-15) is another revelation of the peace of heart which comes to him finally. He has ceased to care for himself. His complete assurance of the reality and power of Jehovah keeps him in perfect peace in this hour of deadly peril. His heart is stayed on God. He has spoken as God has directed, and the consciousness of loyalty to the divine commission is enough for him.

Ch. 45 should also be read here. The last verse is the word of the aged Jeremiah to a disciple who is going through somewhat the same experience that had come to the prophet in his own earlier years. The desire for some definite manifestation of success is strong in Baruch, as once it had been in Jeremiah himself. But the old prophet knows better now. The servant of the Lord must not seek great things for himself: it must be for him sufficient to live and work for God, leaving results to him.

The place of peace is indeed the land called Beulah. But Jeremiah knows that it is not reached by a primrose path.

Reading 67: Jeremiah 23:1-8

THE DAWN OF A NEW DAY

This is a Messianic message, a prophetic vision of a new day when the will of God will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Jeremiah begins by making a distinction between the people and their rulers, the sheep and the shepherds (vv. 1-2). There can be no new day under the old leaders who have misused their powers and scattered far and wide the flock entrusted to them. Here is our first lesson—the responsibility of leadership. "I will visit upon you [the shepherds] the evil of your doings, saith the Lord." There is nothing new about this. But it is one of those lessons which though age old must be learned anew in every gen-

eration, which are as important in the twentieth century as they were in the days of Jeremiah.

In v. 2 the evil of false leadership is described as a scattering of the flock. The nation has lost its unity. Class has been set against class, and the selfish greed of the leaders has spread to the rank and file. Of course it would. People will be like those whom they follow. The result of the kind of leadership with which Judah was cursed was that every man was looking out for himself, without any feeling of responsibility for his neighbor, and also without any taith in him as a source of brotherly support. But in v. 3 the scattering of the sheep is seen to be the work of the Lord, as in v. 2 it is seen as due to the wickedness of the shepherds. After all, the blame is not all on the heads of the shepherds when the flock is a people and the shepherds are their leaders. Human beings have a responsibility for the leaders they choose to follow, and if they choose bad leaders the results are partly a punishment for their own folly, a punishment which comes through the divine law of cause and effect. Lesson two is the responsibility of a people for the leadership it follows.

Lesson three is the source of true leadership (vv. 4-5). It is to God himself that the sheep must look for true shepherds. It is because of their failure to do so that they fall into the hands of those who care less for the people than for their own power and profit. With these verses may well be read Jn. 10:1-18.

With v. 5 the figure of the shepherds and the sheep is dropped, and the reign of a true king is described. In vv. 5-6 there is the characteristic prophetic emphasis on right-eousness. A rebirth of freedom will surpass in glory the great deliverance of Israel from Egypt (vv. 7-8). Lesson four is the essential quality of true leadership; it is essentially righteous, a revelation of the power of a righteous God.

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Reading 68: Jeremiah 23: 9-40

TRUE AND FALSE PROPHETS

A contemporary British writer remarks: "We have not sufficiently considered the disquieting fact that, when we look back upon the history of Israel, we are agreed in calling their popular preachers by the name of 'false prophets." (N. Micklem, *Prophecy and Eschatology*, p 41.) The reading of this and similar passages in Jeremiah may help us to consider the meaning of this "disquieting fact," and the nature of "false prophets."

In vv. 9-12 there is a comparison of the false prophets with the true. The true prophet is appalled by the weight of the task laid upon him.

Desperate tides of the whole great world's anguish Forced thro' the channels of a single heart.

He reels before the dread spectacle of his people's sin. The false prophet has no such burden. He goes with the crowd, not outraged by its evildoing but rather sharing in it, a man of the world. Well, says Jeremiah, the time will come when it will be the false prophet's turn to reel in terror, the terror of the man whose sins have at last found him out.

The false prophets live complacently on the level of those to whom they preach (vv. 13-15) and hence, by giving the sanction of religion to the ways of the world, they strengthen the hands of the evildoers and are actual sources of ungodliness—these men who call themselves the prophets of God.

For whom does the false prophet speak? Not for God. He is the mouthpiece of his own desires, the echo of the prevailing whims of the people, whims which he himself fully shares. The falsity of his prophecy is shown by his failure to rebuke the godless ways of his fellow men, a failure which is due to his inability to see godlessness as particularly

bad. Quite on the other hand, he fills the air with glib and flattering predictions of peace and security. If he were really a prophet of God he would demand that evil should be replaced by goodness. The true prophet is known by his unceasing attempt to bring about a new appreciation of the real nature and true value of goodness. The only peace he preaches is the peace of right relation to God. The only security he knows is the safety which comes from building on the foundations of God (vv. 16-22).

Finally, in vv. 23-40, Jeremiah brings the false prophets face to face with the Lord God himself. The only way in which false men can stand in the place of God's prophets is by blinding their eyes to the reality of God and stopping their ears to his words. After all, there was no excuse for these men whom Jeremiah was denouncing. They had access to a knowledge of God far better than that on which they acted. They sinned against the light—and, therefore, "I am against the prophets, saith the Lord" (v. 31a). God is not mocked. The shallow pretence of these popular preachers with their talk of visions, the completeness of their self-deception (v. 26), shows their absolute failure to know him as a great Reality, ever near, ever present (vv. 23-24). Their work results in the forgetfulness of the true God as surely as did the old idolatries (v. 27). Hence he disowns and rejects all this preaching in his name, all this bold assumption of divine authority. "I will bring . . . upon you . . . a perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten" (v. 40). How terribly has this grim prediction been fulfilled! They have gone down in history as "false prophets."

Reading 69: Jeremiah 28

JEREMIAH ENCOUNTERS A FALSE PROPHET

This chapter shows us a false prophet in action. In his day Hananiah was a great man, one of the court preachers, recognized and honored as a prophet of God by the very

men who scorned and hated Jeremiah as a disturber of the peace and a blasphemer of the true religion. He is not the only character, great and honored in his own day, who would now be quite forgotten were it not for the fact that once he crossed the path of a truly great person and stands out in the light of that momentary encounter as the worthless creature he was. Think of other like encounters—of Samuel and the sons of Eli, of Amos and Amaziah, of Paul and Felix, of Christ and Pilate.

What was Hananiah's message? See vv. 2-4. He runs true to the form of the false prophet with a message of good cheer to Jerusalem. Jeremiah would like to believe him, but this smooth preacher of easy victory does not sound like the prophets of old who were wont to declare the things which people did not want to hear (vv. 5-8). Whether or not Hananiah's words are a message from God will be known by the way in which coming events shape themselves. Jeremiah, you see, is not swept away by the wishful thinking of the crowd, the hope which was father to the prevailing thought.

The bold self-assurance which was characteristic of the false prophet appears in vv. 10-11. Hananiah denounced Jeremiah as a teacher of falsehood! For the moment Jeremiah is silent; then the prophetic conviction seizes him. He is not wrong, and his word is not false—it is the word of God. Hananiah's defiance is a defiance of God, and Jeremiah announces God's sentence of death upon him (cf.

Mt. 12:31).

Jeremiah does not say that Hananiah is consciously false in the sense of knowing that he is deceiving the people. His falsity is more dangerous than that. He has allowed himself to assume prophetic authority without first making that complete dedication to God in which all voices are silenced except God's voice. Self is silent, racial interests and class feeling lose their power, when a man bows before God as Isaiah did in the Temple. He who takes upon

him the authority of a prophet of God and dares to pronounce in his name upon the prophetic claims of others will not be held guiltless if he has not cleansed himself from all stain of self-seeking or national ambition. The great sin of the false prophet is a light view of prophetic responsibility, a superficial religious consciousness. He makes his people trust in a lie because he himself has trusted in a half-truth. He speaks rebellion against God because he has given his life to the service of a half-god.

It is a solemn and awful responsibility which a man assumes when he dares to proclaim himself a spokesmar.

for God.

Reading 70: Jeremiah 29

TRUE AND FALSE FAITH

Here is another clash between a true prophet and the popular preachers. In this instance, however, both true and false prophets are bearers of a message of hope. The differ-

ence is in the kind of hope they hold out.

Jeremiah looks to a day of returning national strength when God's people will honestly and earnestly seek after him (vv. 11-14). That day will come, but it will not come at once. The processes of spiritual growth are slow. Any expectation of a speedy return from Babylon must be given up. The exiles are to establish themselves there and to hope, in faith and patience, for restoration in God's

good time and in God's good way.

The false prophets are not concerned for the spiritual renewal of their people. They think of deliverance as meaning not deliverance from sin, from a shallow religion and low ideals, but as deliverance from unpleasant external conditions. Deliverance is not a change of heart but a change of circumstances. Their hope is the rash and shallow optimism of a shallow religion (vv. 8-9, 21-23). Jeremiah's letter to the exiles was intended to offset the effects of this wild prediction of a speedy downfall of Babylon

and a restoration of the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had

deported.

Jeremiah's optimism is rooted in a moral and spiritual view of life and religion. The favor of God is seen by the false prophets as bestowed without respect to the moral condition of the people, as shown not by spiritual but by material blessing. Jeremiah sees that moral and spiritual blessing is all that gives any value to material goods.

Notice in vv. 24-27 the characteristically insolent rebuke of the true prophet by the popular preacher, the idol of the crowd. The rugged independence of Jeremiah is madness. He dares to set himself against current ideas and popular desires! Shemaiah knows how to deal with people like Jeremiah! Could folly and presumption go further?

Reading 71: Jeremiah 31

THE NEW COVENANT

This chapter is the final expression of Jeremiah's faith in the restoration of Israel. The idea of the new covenant is the high-water mark of his prophetic message (vv. 31-31).

Jeremiah is sure that Jehovah will restore his people because he is a God of love (vv. 8, 20). The story of God's love for his chosen people cannot come to so lame and impotent a conclusion as Israel's disappearance amid nations who have never known God. There is a pathetic description of the downfall of stricken Israel in vv. 15-20, in which Jehovah himself tenderly dries the tears of the heartbroken ancestress of the long-lost people of the Northern Kingdom.

But the great obstacle to the restoration of the chosen race is its stubborn and wayward sinfulness (vv. 21-22). The right way is plain enough, well marked, easily found; but still the people refuse to take it. Their desires and mo-

tives are mixed and conflicting.

There is only one way in which the erring nation can be brought back to God (vv. 31-34). The old basis of the national life, a written covenant, has failed. There must be

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a new basis, a covenant written on the hearts of the Israelites. Motives and desires must be changed and purified, centered on the one true God and his righteousness, so that each individual will by virture of his renewed nature turn to God and find the full satisfaction of his heart in the companionship of God. It will be no longer necessary for anyone to seek instruction from his fellows, for every Israelite will know God for himself in a rich and deep inner experience. In a common experience of the one God, Israel will find a basis of unity which can never be destroyed.

This change of heart can come only by an act of God, but God's love is boundless and God's love wields God's power.

Reading 72: Jeremiah 34:8-22 FALSEHOOD IN HIGH PLACES

Notice the words with which the passage begins (v 8). It is no mere utterance of Jeremiah but a proclamation of God's will which is written here. But what is it that calls forth this divine pronouncement? It is simply the reclamation by the well-to-do people of Jerusalem of some property which they had given up in a moment of weakness. In their fear of the besieging armies of Babylon, they had set free all their Hebrew slaves (vv. 8-10). This was apparently done to win the favor of Jehovah, for the liberation of these bond servants was publicly proclaimed as a covenant with Jehovah, accompanied by the most solemn ceremonies (vv. 8, 10, 15, 18-19).

Once the danger was past, however, these wretches recovered their greedy and treacherous selves, and forced their former slaves back into bondage (vv. 11, 15-16, 21). What an exposure of baseness, of the total lack of both religion and humanity! Jeremiah knew that this cynical treatment of the weak and helpless as mere pawns in the

game of the rich and the powerful was a mad defiance of

the Almighty.

V. 17 is an example of really terrible irony. These people have declared their freedom from the service of God by their defiance of his laws. And he has accepted their declaration of independence. He has set them free. They are no longer his people. He will not reclaim them. They are free to live without him, to perish in battle without his aid, to be devoured by pestilence and famine, to wander homeless and masterless among the nations of the earth. They are free to be the slaves and victims of their own wickedness, without God and without hope in the world.

And this is because of their disregard of the elemental rights of little people who have no friends, no protectors, no power—who have nothing but God! How often and in how many ways is this truth hammered home in the pro-

phetic writings!

Reading 73: Jeremiah 35

A LESSON IN FIDELITY

Who were the Rechabites? Certainly they were a strange group, from the description of them in vv. 6-10. They were a clan which, in the days of the conquest under Joshua, had refused to adopt the new ways upon which Israel had entered when the customs of the desert were exchanged for those of the settled life of Canaan. Notice how rigidly they clung to the habits and pursuits of the desert wanderers from whom they were sprung. The only thing that brought them to a city like Jerusalem was the pressure of the invading armies of Syrians and Chaldeans (v. 11).

Now we can scarcely think that the Rechabites were held up by the prophet Jeremiah as examples to be followed in every way by his people. This wholesale rejection of what was, after all, an advance in civilization was certainly not recommended by the prophet either in practice or by precept. Nevertheless, he saw something splendid in the sturdy

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fidelity of these people to the faith of their fathers, and he was sure that God himself approved of them and would bless them.

It is possible that we accept too easily the material comforts and conveniences which come with increased wealth. Israel's entry into Canaan had meant an increase of material riches. Our own nation in the last fifty years has become richer than any other people in the world's history. Have we seen the dangers which go with such changes, and have we been careful to guard against them and to keep the old virtues of our fathers? At least the Rechabites did that. We ought to be able to find a more excellent way, but it is not to be found in the unthinking acceptance of every change as a sure mark of progress.

Is there not a tendency to lose the real fundamentals of religion while we think we are simply making proper adjustments to new conditions and circumstances? Notice Jeremiah's word as to the inevitable result of Israel's failure to keep the faith (vv. 12-17). Can we hope to fare any better unless we succeed where they failed?

Written Work.-Write on one of the following:

1. An ancient pilgrim's progress-Jeremiah finds the way to peace. Readings 65 and 66.

2. True and false prophets, and the marks which distinguish them. Readings 68-70.

3. The new covenant. Reading 71.

4. A lesson from the Rechabites. Reading 73.

Reading 74: Jeremiah 36 AUTOCRAT AND PROPHET

Read vv. 1-3 and note the purpose of God's command to Jeremiah. The written word is a means of salvation. Jehovah is pleading with a stubborn people. There is deep pathos in v. 3: God's hope that he may be able to forgive his people and God's helplessness in the face of human

stubbornness. In vv. 4-8 Jeremiah makes provision for the "publication" of his book, and Baruch accepts what he must have known to be a dangerous mission.

Then comes the great day when the roll is read aloud, first to the people gathered in a solemn religious assembly and then to the leaders of Israel (vv. 9-19). These great men teel that it is their duty to make this prophetic manifesto known to the king; but, knowing their king, knowing how angry this will make him, they take good care to warn Jeremiah and his messenger to go into hiding at once. It is clear that this roll contains the characteristically fearless words of the great prophet. He had not watered his message down when he came to write it.

The attitude of the king is one of angry contempt (vv. 20-26). Note v. 24. the failure of the king and his courtiers to be moved by any feeling other than that of anger is strange and terrible (cf. 2 Kings 22:10-13). Hardened and proud, the king thinks to destroy unpleasant ideas by burning the parchment on which they are written. The German Nazis shared the same mad delusion, the delusion of all enemies of ideas. In vv. 27-32 the folly of such action is emphasized and the doom of the tyrant who stops his ears and hardens his heart is pronounced.

A few pieces of parchiment on one side—and all the might of Judah's king on the other! But we know where the real power was. Shall we ever learn the lesson of the power of the idea?

Reading 75: Jeremiah 37:3-15; 38:1-6, 14-16, 24-28; 39:4-7 THE LAST AGONIES OF JERUSALEM

First picture the situation as clearly as you can. There is a long-drawn struggle, with moments of hope succeeded by the slow agony of a famine which finally becomes outright starvation (37:5, 21; 38:2). Finally come the storming of the walls and the dragging into exile of the people of the city who survived the massacre which came when the victorious Babylonian soldiers burst into the streets. The land is left to the peasantry of the countryside under a governor appointed by the conquerors (39:1-10; 40:7-12). It is the death struggle of a nation.

In these chapters there are three centers of interest:

1. The princes, the leaders in this last struggle for freedom. These were the generals, the leading politicians, the "strong men" of the time (37:11-15; 38:1-6, 25, 27). Notice the character of these men as shown in their treatment of Jeremiah. They were single-minded, ruled by one principle, and that was resistance to the power of Babylon. But though this may seem like a heroic struggle for liberty, it was denounced by Jeremiah as reckless and evil. Why? The princes could see in the prophet only a traitor, and he was fortunate to escape with his life. It is a strange situation: the prophet of the God of freedom denounces the champions of his country's liberty. But what did these princes mean by liberty? See ch. 34. The freedom of men like that may not be of much value in the sight of God, and it may be of little value to the people they lead. Perhaps the peasants of Judah were better off after Jerusalem had fallen.

2. The king. Zedekiah is neither cruel nor irreligious, but he is weak, unable to curb the princes or to obey the voice of the prophet in whom he evidently believes. The keynote of his character is to be found in 38:5, 25-26. Jeremiah, although he knows how little Zedekiah is to be relied on, still has a measure of sympathy with the poor man and urges upon him the firm decision which alone can save him. Even the king's request that their conversation be in part concealed from the princes was respected by the prophet. Zedekiah is a bruised reed, but Jeremiah does not want to

break him.

Notice the terrible fate which comes to the spineless king (39:4-7). In times like those in which he lived, weak-

ness, however kindly it may be, is certain ruin. And it must be remembered that there is less excuse for Zedekiah's weakness since he knows Jeremiah and has the example of the prophet's unflinching faith and courage as well as the

inspiration of his words.

3. Jeremiah. The prophet alone can read the signs of the times. He alone can rise superior to fear for his own safety, and to the strong influence of the patriotic spirit (37:6-10, 17; 38:2-4). Our fears and our affections have great power over our thinking. Zedekiah cannot bring himself to face the facts of his situation and surrender, because he is afraid of the consequences to himself. The princes in their desperate zeal for the independence of their country cannot think straight at all; they catch at every straw, like the momentary retreat of the Babylonians (37:5-7) But Jeremiah can think straight and see clearly. What is his secret? (See Jn. 7:17.)

Reading 76: Jeremiah 42:1-17; 43:1-7; 44:24-30 THE LAST DAYS OF JEREMIAH

After the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah has his choice of remaining in Judea with the poorer people of the country, for whom as a matter of fact the downfall of the kingdom seems to have meant liberation (39:10; 40:7-12), or of going to Babylon as a favored guest (40:1-6). Jeremiah is a true Hebrew, and the prospect of being the guest of Nebuchadnezzar has no attractions for him. Nor has he any very strong liking for the people who have by their folly brought final ruin upon their country. His sympathies are with the peasantry, and with them he chooses to stay. His fidelity is but ill repaid, and the story of his last days is not a pleasant one. The steadfast loyalty of the old prophet to the truth as it is given him to see it remains, however, unshaken; and he dies as he has lived, a witness for God amid a faithless generation.

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Notice 42:11: this might be taken as the motto of Jeremiah's whole life. As he speaks these words, what a long and rich experience he has to look back upon! How much more they mean to him than to any of his hearers! He stands there as a veteran of many a hard-fought battle, with only scars to show for his services—only scars to show, for the great rewards of service like Jeremiah's do not show.

The character of the people among whom he spends his closing years is revealed in 43:1-7. They will not accept a message from God's prophet if it does not suit them. It is an old story to Jeremiah; their words of rejection come as no surprise. Fear and the shortsighted selfishness which breeds fear have voices louder in their ears than the voice of God. And so they turn their eyes to Egypt and its corruptions, dragging the prophet with them into a needless and useless exile.

Thus to the end Jeremiah's faith is tried—tried but never found wanting. The last words of his which have been reported for us are a prophecy of doom (44:24-30). Not even at the sunset of his life is there for Jeremiah a discharge from the holy war in which his life has been spent.

IX

EZEKIEL

EZEKIEL was one of those inhabitants of Jerusalem who were carried into exile by the Babylonians when they captured Jerusalem for the first time, in 597 B.C. It was not until the fifth year of his exile that he received his prophetic commission (1:2-3). Thus his work was done among his fellow captives in Babylonia and, apparently, among a comparatively small group living on the banks of the river Chebar. Nevertheless, the influence of Ezekiel was one of the great elements in the process by which the exiles became the leaders in restoring Jerusalem and making it the center of a purified religion in which the principles of the great prophets were embodied in a system of rules and observances. True, the system had its dangers. It tended to encourage too complete a reliance on external forms, and in the end it produced the Pharisaism which Jesus denounced. But though it did degenerate, it did not do so until it had saved the religion of Jehovah for the world: and in that great work Ezekiel, the spiritual leader of a small exilic settlement, had a large part. Indeed, he has been called the father of Judaism.

The details of Ezekiel's life are set forth in ABC in the introduction to the commentary on his book, pp. 714-15. Here it may be pointed out that the prophet's work falls into three parts: (1) the period from his call to the final destruction of Jerusalem; (2) the time directly following the destruction of Jerusalem, when the exiles were plunged

into such a depth of despair that they were in danger of giving up their religion altogether; and (3) the later years of Ezekiel's life, in which he busied himself in writing down his vision of a new Jerusalem in which Jehovah would dwell forever. *Readings* 77 to 85 are drawn from the sermons of the first period, 86 to 88 from the second, and the last *Reading* is taken from chs. 40-48, which deal with the restored Jerusalem.

Reading 77: Ezekiel 1 EZEKIEL'S VISION OF GOD

This chapter is characteristic of Ezekiel. The elaborate and complicated nature of the symbols he uses to describe his vision is in marked contrast to the work of the other prophets. The whole chapter is an introduction to the account of his prophetic call. There is no such lengthy preparation to the description of the divine commissioning of any other prophet. (Cf. Amos 7:14-15; Hos. 1:2; Jer. 1:4-10. Even in Isa. 6 there is no such detailed account of the appearance of Jehovah.) Notice the care taken to make clear the symbolic character of the prophet's words-v. 4, "as it were"; v. 5, "the likeness," "the appearance"; v. 28, "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord." The description is not to be taken literally. What Ezekiel has seen cannot be expressed in words. All he can do is to use figures of speech which convey the impression of dazzling splendor.

In reading the chapter, therefore, we must try to get at the meaning of the forms in which the prophet's firsthand realization of God's presence in his life and in the world

came to him. Note:

1. The dazzling brightness which is emphasized again and again, vv. 4, 7, 13-14, 27-28. Above all, the impression left on Ezekiel was that of a supreme giory.

2. The ceaseless activity which surrounds the divine

Being. His attendant spirits are in constant but effortless

activity (vv. 12-14, 17, 19, 24).

3. The spiritual nature of the divine activity (vv. 12, 19-21). Wheels are mechanical instruments, but the heavenly chariot is not a mechanism. It is moved by a living spirit (vv. 20-21; see also v. 18).

4. The penetrating knowledge of the divine Being. The

wheels are full of eyes.

5. The awful majesty of the voice of God (vv. 25, 28).

6. The strangeness of the attendant creatures. They are human but more than human. Their superhuman power is expressed by saying that they combine with "the likeness of a man" the highest types of the animal world: the lion as majestic and terrible, the eagle as swift, the ox as patient and strong.

7. The divine chariot (vv. 15-28). The Lord is seated upon a great moving throne. He is not confined to the Temple or to any other one place, but is constantly and

freely going about throughout the world.

What, in summary, is the idea of God which was imprinted in vision upon the mind of Ezekiel? Has it point and meaning for us?

Reading 78: Ezekiel 2:1-3:15

EZEKIEL'S CALL

Notice the prophet's use of the term "son of man" in referring to himself (2: 1, 3, 8: 3:1, 3, 10). The Lord is calling into his service one who is merely human. Only as he is divinely inspired can a man, with all the weakness of humanity, rise high enough above his fellows to confront them with divine truth; for only as God's Spirit enters into him can a son of man hear and understand the word which the Lord has for him (v. 2). But the son of man is not simply a passive tool in the hand of God (vv. 4-8). He must open his mind to receive the message, must give himself in faith and courage to the work assigned him.

There is a strong emphasis on the need of complete surrender on the part of the prophet. The divine message must become part of his life, as food becomes the very stuff of the body.

There is in vv. 5-7 the characteristic prophetic note of complete reliance on God. He is not to regard the attitudes of those to whom he speaks. He is God's messenger, and that must be enough for him. His task is to see to it that the voice of the Lord is heard in the world, that men may know that they have not been left without a prophet. The sole responsibility of Ezekiel is to present his message in such a way that even those who disobey it will know that what they have heard is no mere human utterance. This he can do if he opens his life to the incoming of the Spirit.

Like all the prophets, Ezekiel finds in the divine call something which is imperative and overpowering (3:12-15). See *Reading* 53, par. 2. In Ezekiel's case he uses figures of speech which suggest a sense of physical compulsion—"the Spirit lifted me up." Notice that the expression is used twice, vv. 12, 14. In 3:14-15 the effect on the prophet's

heart and mind is vividly expressed.

It is interesting to note the difference between Ezekiel and Jeremiah with respect to their feeling about God's dealing with them. Both are conscious of their human frailty as distinguished from the power of the God who calls them. Both are aware of the difficulty of their task and of the opposition they are sure to meet. But Ezekiel has no such inner struggle as that which went on so long in the life of Jeremiah. No doubt he suffered, but he did not suffer long. Yet perhaps it is for this very reason that he is not as great a prophet as the more sensitive Jeremiah.

Reading 79: Ezekiel 7 AN END OF THE LORD'S PATIENCE

The first period of Ezekiel's ministry, which ended with the ruin of Jerusalem, was given over principally to a denunciation of the evils which disgraced the city. He spoke to his fellow exiles at Tel-abib in an attempt to make them see the true meaning of the events which were taking place in distant Palestine. They were comforting themselves with false hopes, cherishing the delusion that the Lord could not and would not destroy his chosen city. Great though their calamities had been, dark as their prospects were, still the storm would pass. There could be no downfall of the city in which Jehovah's Temple stood. The destruction of this false optimism was a necessity, for it was based upon an utterly wrong idea of Jehovah and his religion. Ezekiel knew that a holy God could not and would not protect a wicked and corrupt city, that the forthcoming fall of Jerusalem was a sign not of Jehovah's powerlessness to protect her but of his righteous will to punish iniquity. He knew that if the people to whom he spoke were to preserve the religion of the true God they must be brought to face the bitter fact that their misfortunes were not a passing incident but marked the end of the Lord's patience and his resolve to begin a new era in which in humble penitence his people would learn to know him in spirit and in truth. There is a kind of optimism which is a sin against God, since it is based on a false and degrading idea of him.

Here, then, is a typical sermon of the time when to Ezekiel was given the hard task of destroying the cherished

hopes of the people he loved.

In the prophet's sermon there is a skillful blending of a prediction of the doom of Jerusalem with a statement of its causes and its meaning. The congregation is made to see the terrible picture of a great city in its last agonies, and at the same time this appalling disaster is shown to be the result of the pride and violence which have long characterized the city's life (vv. 10-11, 14-22). The world is ruled by a righteous God, and now his judgment is being executed (vv. 3, 9, 27).

It is an end, but not the end of Jehovah's dealings with his people. The fall of Jerusalem is the end of the old era, but it is also the beginning of a new age. It is designed to bring the remnant of Israel to its senses in a knowledge of the true God (vv. 4, 9, 27). What mercy had failed to teach must now be learned by the hard way of chastisement. Thus the prophet seeks to destroy the false hope of a religion which made ritual forms and sacred places more important than a broken and a contrite heart.

Perhaps our own generation with its strange lack of penitence as it stands under a judgment even more terrible than that which came upon Judah might profit by teaching like this. Upon what is our optimism based? How honestly do we face the existence in our national life of evils which can never escape the searching eye of a righteous God?

These are questions which we ought to be asking.

Reading 80: Ezekiel 13 FALSE PROPHETS

To the very end of Jerusalem's struggle there were to be found men claiming to be prophets of the Lord who encouraged the people and their leaders to expect a miraculous deliverance. Such men were active among the exiles, as we have already learned (Jer. 29:15). Ezekiel was confronted with them as the preachers of the false hope which he sought to destroy. In this chapter he denounces them as enemies of God and of the nation they were deceiving.

They have no message from God (vv. 1-3). They are self-deceived, mistaking their own wild enthusiasm for the Spirit of God, their own empty imaginations for visions sent by him. Such folly means destruction. These men who have not waited for the divine word but have rushed headlong to preach a message which echoes only their own desires are doomed. The evidence of the falsity of their prophecies is clear. Instead of a manful attack on the evils of their time, they make things worse—like jackals burrowing

among ruins and making them more ruinous than ever by undermining them (vv. 4-5). Or they are like dishonest workmen who conceal the flaws in their building by whitewashing it (vv. 10-16.) So base are these self-appointed prophets that they openly practice sorcery (vv. 17-23). Some of them have taken money to work by magic the death of men whose enemies hired them (v. 19). They were actually trading on their reputation as men with a special relation to God to claim the power to control his supernatural activity. They were working upon the superstition of the people for their own profit.

How can the persistence and prevalence of such false prophecy be accounted for? How could such cheap frauds

gain a hearing?

1. The people of Israel were always religious-minded. They sought for a word from the Lord. Now a demand always creates a supply (see 14:1-5). It means an opportunity for the true prophet, but it also opens a door for the clever impostor or the self-deceived enthusiast.

2. These religious-minded people were not deep enough in their religion. They were self-willed, ruled by their own desires and passions. What they wanted from religion was an assurance that they were to have their own way. Hence they gave less heed to the fearless and independent spokesman for a moral God than to the men who told them what they wanted to hear. Note 2:3-7. The quality of the demand controlled the quality of the supply.

In our own day we have a plentiful supply of cheap and false religious teachers, and they flourish for exactly the same reasons as those which account for the false prophets of old. There are always hosts of people whose religion is shallow. Instead of the broken and contrite heart, they have itching ears. They want a message which will assure them that they can serve two masters, or they seek a religion which will give them the power to make God their servant, rather than a gospel which offers life

to those who will take the way of the cross. There are always people who have just enough religion to make them the prey of the false prophet, whether he is the oily man of God who gives his respectable but worldly congregation the pleasant assurance that they can compound for serving Mammon six days in the week by sitting in a pew, at least occasionally, for an hour or so on the seventh, or is one of the more obvious frauds who produces a modern version of some ancient superstition as a new and superior religion of which he is priest and prophet combined. You can make your own list.

The causes of false prophecy are to be found in the shallowness and corruption of Israel's religion. But how can the true prophet be explained? Ezekiel and Jeremiah lived and prophesied in the darkest hours of national degeneracy, the very time when false prophets abounded. There was at work in the world a Power other than the will of the people, a Spirit other than the spirit of the times. And corrupt as Israel was, there were still within the nation those who had ears to hear the word of the true God. It is to that saving remnant that we owe the preservation of true religion.

Reading 81: Ezekiel 15 THE TRUE WEALTH OF ISRAEL

This is the shortest chapter in the book, but it is of great value as setting forth a sharply defined idea of the true wealth of Israel, the real reason for her greatness among the nations of the earth.

We should try to imagine what the exiles in Babylonia considered the really important things about their nation. What was it in the life of Israel which most concerned them? Do you think it likely that they thought of Jerusalem as great solely because in her was being developed a religion centering around a God of righteousness? Of course they did not. Nevertheless, they saw in Israel something worth dying

for, something which should not be allowed to perish from the earth.

Ezekiel's little allegory compares Israel among the nations to the vine among the trees. As a tree the vine has little to recommend it (vv. 2-4). Its wood is worthless for anything but fuel, and then only if a quick fire is all that is wanted. Israel when judged by the ordinary standards of world greatness is in much the same class among the nations as the vine is among the trees. Now in her sadly reduced condition she has no claim to the least consideration. Her only value is that her destruction will teach the lesson of Jehovah's true nature.

But every one of Ezekiel's hearers knew that, though the vine was indeed of little value as a tree, it had a great value of its own in its fruit. They could not help seeing that Ezekiel meant to tell them that merely as one of the world's nations Israel was of little or no importance. They could not help asking whether in her useless attempt to find a place among the world powers of her time Israel was not as foolish as a vine which tried to compete in size or function with the oak or the cedar, and gave up bearing grapes. Perhaps Israel had her own special fruit which marked her out from the nations of the earth and set up for her entirely different standards of greatness.

Ezekiel's allegory may have an application to our own nation and its life. To be sure, we stand among the nations as one of the great powers. But is our greatness a matter of our wealth and the might it gives us?

Written Work.-Write on one of the following topics:

- 1. The true basis for confidence in the future of a nation. Readings 79, 81.
 - 2. False prophets of today. Reading 80.

EZEKIEL

Reading 82: Ezekiel 20:1-44

AN OUTLINE OF ISRAEL'S HISTORY

This chapter may be compared with chs. 16 and 23, which are also surveys of the history of the Lord's dealings with Israel. Notice that the main theme of the prophet's discourse is the continual and deep-scated rebellion of Israel against the leadership of Jehovah. Far from picturing her as a nation with a natural instinct for following the true God, Ezekiel stresses the repeated and persistent rejection of the commands of Jehovah, all of which had been given for the good of an ungrateful people. Compare the speech of Stephen in Acts 7.

The reproach of the prophet is called forth by a visit to him of some of the leading members of the group of exiles to which he ministered. Apparently they showed no signs of penitence for the evils which had brought about their exile Hence the prophet is told by God to review for them the whole course of their nation's history (vv. 1-4).

Ezekiel reminds them that the ungrateful and rebellious spirit of Israel had been manifest even before they had left Egypt (see Ex. 5:15-21; 14:10-12). It was shown again and again in the wilderness (vv. 5-17). The generation which had been delivered from bondage in Egypt left to their children the heritage of this rebellious disposition, and these showed the same tendency to idolatry even in the Promised Land (vv. 18-26). All this was in spite of the clear revelation of the true way of life repeatedly made to them (vv. 5, 11-12, 18-21). Idolatry and false laws, all the vile corruptions of Canaanite life, have ruled in the land to the very day on which the prophet is speaking. How can they expect that Jehovah will answer their prayer for guidance (vv. 31-32)?

Jehovah will save them in spite of themselves, that the world may know him. This has been his purpose in his long patience with stubborn Israel (vv. 9, 14, 22, 41). Since

he is a righteous and holy God the salvation of a rebellious people can come only when they are purged by the terrible discipline of national ruin and exile; they cannot be saved in their sins (vv. 36-39). Ezekiel's emphasis is on the sovereign power of God. Not even the sins of Israel can thwart his purpose. But sin is no light thing, and its conquest means great and prolonged suffering for the sinners. Nevertheless, Jehovah accepts the responsibility for vindicating his power and his wisdom before the peoples of the earth. The salvation of Israel is part of a world-wide purpose (vv. 9, 14, 22, 26, 41).

Reading 83: Ezekiel 22 THE SINS OF A GREAT CITY

Ezekiel has been accused of preaching a one-sided individualism without regard to the effects for good or evil of the social ties which make not only the individual but a city or a nation responsible in the sight of God. He has been accused also, as the "father of Judaism." of an overemphasis on ritual as shown in chs. 40-48. But ch. 22 is a sufficient answer to both these criticisms.

The sins here denounced are sins of the city because the tone and atmosphere of the life of the city tolerates and encourages them. There is no healthy public opinion to protest these evils, and thus in time they become the ruling power in forming public opinion, and actually gain general approval. Notice v. 3, "in the midst of her." These outrages against human life are practiced openly without fear of rebuke or punishment. See also vv. 6-7, 9-10, 12, "in thee." The expression is repeated to drive home the terrible truth that the evil-doings against which the prophet thunders have not been done in a corner. Individual men, of course, have done all these things; but the city has let them do them without effective protest. Good men have sinned in evading their responsibility for the moral condition of their city.

The chapter falls into three divisions: (1) denunciation

of specific evils, vv. 2-16; (2) announcement of the divine sentence upon the sinful nation, vv. 17-22; and (3) denunciation of the various classes into which the population of the city is divided, vv. 22-31.

Perhaps v. 30 is the keynote of the chapter. The total

lack of strong moral leadership dooms the city.

Hardly any chapter of the book has a more direct application to our modern life, so largely centered in cities. Think of our "underworld," our "racketeers," the many forms of organized vice, all the evils which are part and parcel of the life of our cities. Think of the way in which the poor are treated even in wealthy America. Think of the increasing tolerance of gambling, of drunkenness, of all forms of "sophisticated" dissipation. How effective is our battle for righteousness? How clearly do we see the danger of such conditions in a world in which the God of Ezekiel still rules?

Reading 84: Ezekiel 25

THE SIN OF NATIONAL SELFISHNESS

Like most of the prophets, Ezekiel has a number of discourses which have to do with Israel's neighbors. The section of the book which begins with ch. 25 and continues through ch. 32 is made up of prophecies of disaster which is to come as divinely ordained punishment upon these nations, from Egypt in the south to Tyre in the north.

These nations, which once played a great part in the world, are now almost forgotten. The ruins of their cities are literally buried. In these chapters Ezekiel tells us the reasons for their downfall. We may read them as a study in the moral and spiritual diseases of nations—diseases which are fatal unless they are checked in time. It is to be noted that the prophets never for a moment thought that governments or nations were a law unto themselves. Like individuals, they were subject to Jehovah's law of righteousness.

Ch. 25 deals with the nations which are immediate

neighbors of Israel. Notice the grounds on which they are condemned. Ammon and Moab have greeted the rum of Judah with rejoicing. What should we think of individual men who looked on with smug self-satisfaction at the moral and spiritual ruin of their neighbors, and even rejoiced over it as removing from their own way actual or possible rivals? What should we think of people who saw with open and callous rejoicing the ruin of some man once honorable and virtuous who had vielded to temptation, stooped to evil practices, and paid for his errors by a prison term? Well, Ezekiel looked at Ammon and Moab just as we should look at such individuals, and he tells us that God looks at them in the same way.

Is he right? Is it true that God expects nations to look with pity and sympathy on the mistortunes of their neighbors? Is it true that he expects them to learn with reverent awe the lesson which is taught by the execution of the divine judgment on nations which have departed from the paths of righteousness? Ammon and Moab might have been led to a repentant realization of their own errors as they beheld the tragic fate of Judah. Instead they hugged themselves in cruel joy and lost their chance to save themselves from a like misfortune.

Vv. 12 and 15 tell even worse things of Fdom and Philistia. They have taken advantage of Judah's misfortunes to satisfy their old grudges against her. Such national baseness is folly in a world which is morally governed.

These are lessons which we may well take to heart. What is our attitude to other peoples at a time when the world has become one neighborhood? Years ago, when Europe was going through the agony which led to the second World War, an American senator remarked. "Thank God we are out of that mess." That spirit had much to do with making war inevitable, a war which we could not keep out of. Perhaps hard experience may help us to learn the lesson which Ezekiel sought to teach.

EZEKIEL

Reading 85: Ezekiel 28:1-19

THE DOWNFALL OF A GREAT COMMERCIAL EMPIRE

Tyre was the great city of the Phoenicians, the leading trading nation of the ancient world. In chs. 26-28 Ezekiel describes with great power the wealth and splendor of the mighty city, her far-reaching commerce, the high place which she held in the eyes of the world. Tyre is pictured as a great ship; we are given a list of the lands with which she traded and the goods they produced (27:1-25). But the splendid vessel is broken in a storm (27:26-28). The consternation of the nations at this calamity, terrible because it was quite unexpected, is vividly expressed (26:15-18; 27:29-36). The completeness of the wreck is set forth in 26:1-14.

Why has this judgment been visited on Tyre? Ezekiel sees that she has fallen a victim to the temptations which beset every commercial nation. She has yielded to the greedy passion for wealth at any cost, embarking in any kind of business which brought profit (28:18. Tyre was a center of the inhuman slave trade, 27:13). She has been guilty of that overmastering pride of wealth which is the besetting sin of great money-makers, a pride which has robbed her of all sense of the superior value of spiritual goods and made her blind to her moral responsibility for the right use of the riches she has won (28:1-9, 17). These are the sins of a nation of successful traders, betrayed by its own success. Ezekiel is sure that greed and pride mean downfall in the end, and he sees that end swiftly approaching The righteous rule of God is the great reality, the one thing of which he is sure.

But the moral corruption of Tyre is not something to which she has been doomed by an inescapable fate. In 28:11-15 the prophet shows what might have been. Tyre's commercial greatness opened to her a splendid opportunity for leadership in religious and moral development. The

city is personified in her king, who had a place in the garden of God but lost it through his sins. She had allowed herself to be so completely absorbed in getting rich that she lost sight of everything else. What should have been used as a means to a greater end became an end in itself. Tyre had lost her soul to find too late that a nation without a soul cannot long survive the attacks of equally soulless and greedy neighbors.

Surely it is unnecessary to point out the application of this prophetic teaching to our own civilization. America is the workshop of the world, her wares are to be found in every land, her wealth is vast and constantly increasing. But what are we doing with it all, and what is it doing to us?

Reading 86: Ezekiel 18

THE RESPONSIBILITY AND OPPORTUNITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL

Ezekiel has been called the prophet of individualism. In this chapter there is a detailed account of his teaching on the place of the individual man in the sight of God. Another statement of this doctrine is found in 33:10-20.

There are two main points:

1. Vv. 1-20. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (v. 20a). The emphatic word is "it." No innocent soul shall perish. Notice the prophet's starting point in v. 2. He quotes a proverb which is in common use among his congregation of exiles, probably after the fall of Jerusalem had put an end to their delusive hopes. This proverb is a wail of despair which serves as an excuse for doing nothing, for allowing oneself to drilt helplessly with the tide of circumstances, expecting nothing from a God who rules with cold disregard of the individual. The people complain that they are being punished for the sins of their fathers. Since the evil past, with which they had nothing to do, is beyond change, there is nothing left but to resign themselves to an unjust fate. Certainly they cannot be expected to feel

any loyalty to a God who is responsible for it.

The prophet meets this with a specific, point-by-point denial. Only the sinner is punished, and he is punished only for his own sins. But who are the righteous? In vv. 5-9 there is a description of the truly good man which is worth attention. It sets a very high standard. These people who were so sure of their own spotless innocence might well have felt some uneasy stirrings of conscience when they heard these words. Note the way in which the prophet works out in specific detail his teaching of the direct dealing of Jehovah with the individual, always on the basis of a strictly moral judgment (vv. 10-20).

2. Vv. 21-28. No man's fate is fixed forever by his past.

2. Vv. 21-28. No man's fate is fixed forever by his past. No one need despair because of his misdoings if he does not persist in them. The moral battle is not lost while life remains. The prophet challenges his countrymen to take up arms against the evils to which they have surrendered, and assures them of the divine pardon of every repentant soul. At the same time, there is another side to this. He warns those who rely, with however much justice, on their righteousness, that they cannot lay up a store of merit which will excuse them for yielding to temptation. The best of men must be constantly on their guard (vv. 29-32). Compare Mk. 13:33-37; Mt. 25:1-13.

But does not Ezekiel go too far? Are there not such things as example, and the influence of one person on another, and heredity? Do not men suffer for the sins of their neighbors and their parents? Of course these things are so, and of course Ezekiel knew it. But he knew also that in facing his own life problems the individual is well advised to forget those things that are beyond his control and to accept full responsibility for making his own choices. Nor should he allow his will to be paralyzed by memories from an unworthy past. After all, the decision is his, and he must make it in the living present. God is always with

the man who wills to do the right. Whosoever will may

This is the final word of the chapter (vv. 31-32). Always the doors of the Father's house are open, and it is never too late to enter.

Written Work.-Write on one of the following topics:

1. The responsibility and opportunity of the individual. Readings 83, 86. (Reading 83 is assigned here because it shows that Ezekiel did not think of the individual person as entirely separated from the life of the community in which he lived.)

2. Commercial and industrial prosperity and the real

welfare of a nation. Reading 85.

Reading 87: Ezekiel 33:1-16, 30-33 THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PROPHET

That Ezekiel was at times dismayed and discouraged by the way his people disregarded his message is shown by this passage. Of what use is it to preach to people who listen to him with polite inattention? They tell him that they "enjoy" his sermons, and that is just the trouble—they do enjoy them (vv. 30-33). It can have been but small comfort to a man who sought wholeheartedly to bring his people to a saving knowledge of God to know that they would learn the error of their ways only when his grim predictions were grimly fulfilled. The longing of his heart echoed the yearning of the divine love (v. 11). His great desire, like that of Paul in a later age, was that Israel might turn from her ways and live; but of that there was no sign (cf. Rom. 9: 1-5; 10:1).

Many a modern preacher feels as Ezekiel felt. Has the word which came to the prophet of old a meaning for us?

1. He is told that his responsibility is confined to a fearless and complete delivery of his message of warning (vv. 1-9). For that he will be held strictly answerable. He is God's watchman, and he is sent back to his pulpit with a new and mighty sense of the seriousness and dignity of his work. He is to look to God as the final judge of his work and not to the results as shown by its effect on his congregation.

2. He is told that he speaks for a God of yearning love (v. 11). He is a God of righteousness dealing in justice with his people, never accepting them in their sin; but he is merciful to forgive the penitent, no matter how dark his past may have been (vv. 10-20). If Israel is to perish it is because she will not live, for no man perishes except as he refuses the divine invitation to life (vv. 10-11). Ezekiel faced his people with a great and heartening realization that his message of doom was only the reverse side of his good news of the open door of God's house.

To speak for God is a supreme privilege. When God is known as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, how sublime the task becomes! The word which came to Ezckiel should come to the preacher of today with greater power, since he lives in the light of the gospel. He preaches a love

that will not let men go.

Reading 88: Ezekiel 37:1-14 NEW LIFE FROM GOD

Evidently the vision described in this passage came to Ezekiel as he pondered over the hopelessness in which his people were sunk when the news came that Jerusalem was utterly destroyed. It meant to them a deadly disillusionment. The faith on which they had relied was shattered. Jehovah would not or could not protect his holy city and the Temple which was his earthly dwelling place. Israel's race was run. There was no future for her (v. 11).

In his vision Ezekiel sees the perfect symbol of utter hopelessness. He stands in a valley filled with human bones, long since bleached and dry, not a particle of flesh or sinew remaining, the skeletons fallen apart (vv. 1-3, 7).

Surely the most pessimistic of his exilic congregation would have gone no further in search of a picture of the complete

death of all hope.

But to these poor relics of an army slaughtered long ago Ezekiel is bidden to preach. These bones are to become living men at his word, for his message is the message of Jehovah. As he preaches the miracle happens: "the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet" (v. 10). This is the vision.

In vv. 11-14 is the application of this vision to the life of exiled Israel. With God all things are possible; and because Jehovah has not forsaken his people, and will not, their restoration will come even though it involves a miraculous resurrection from the grave of national ruin. The gracious purpose of the Lord cannot be brought to nothing by human folly and sin (cf. 32:22-31).

We sometimes take as a matter of course Israel's emergence from exile with a stronger national unity and a purer religion than ever. In fact it is one of the most extraordinary occurrences in all history. Ezekiel's faith which foresaw it enabled him to become a powerful instrument in God's hands in giving life to the dry bones of the fallen nation.

"All things are possible with God" (Mk. 10:27). "If ye have faith, . . . ve shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence" (Mt. 17:20). "The prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought rightcousness, obtained promises" (Heb. 11:32b-33).

Reading 89: Ezekiel 40:1-16; 43:1-12; 47:1-12 THE NEW JERUSALEM

In chs. 40-48 Ezekiel describes the Jerusalem of the future. Read 40:1-16 to note the exact detail into which the prophet goes in his description. It will be seen at once that what he is seeing in his vision is not the city, which is dismissed with a bare mention, but the Temple, which is the all-important thing in the Jerusalem which is to be (vv. 2-5).

The key passage for these chapters is 43:1-12. The new Temple is the worthy dwelling place on earth of the God of Israel, the one God of all the world. No wonder, then, that it is the center of the city's life, beside which all else is of little significance. No wonder that every detail about it is worth the most careful recording. For here shines the glory of the Lord. Notice the repetition of the word glory (vv. 1, 4-5).

In 43:10-12 the purpose of the attention to exact detail is set forth. Everything about the new Temple is to act as a reminder of the holiness of Jehovah, and of Israel's responsibility for the most exact observance of forms of worship worthy of that holiness, and for living a holy life (vv. 7-9, 10-12; cf. also 45:9-12).

"Thus Ezckiel's conception of the ideal Jerusalem is that of a city devoted to the maintenance of the pure worship of Jehovah, who in the majesty of his divine being will dwell in his house. The idea which had ruled in the old Jerusalem had been the ambition of the kings to preserve a strong national state, following as well as they could in the footsteps of David and Solomon. The maintenance of the Temple and its services was one of the royal functions, but it was only one of them, and for most of the kings it was subordinate to the task of preserving and increasing the power of the nation. But that idea was to be abandoned in the new Jerusalem. Her people and her rulers would seek her greatness in nothing but her religion. The new community would be a church first and a state second.

It is astonishing to see how well Ezekiel divined the true purpose of Israel's life. His inspired insight became the guiding light of the men of the restoration like Ezra and Nehemiah. We may go further and say that the greatness of any nation is not a matter of political and military power. A nation is great as it realizes that it is the instrument by which a spiritual purpose is being advanced in

the world. Rome's great gift to the world was Roman justice, Greece was mighty as the home of thought and art; and these things remain when the legions of Rome have long ceased to march and Greek fleets and armies have vanished. At Gettysburg, Lincoln spoke of America as a nation dedicated to a great ideal of human freedom. We may well regard such an ideal as God given. How truly is our national life centered in that ideal? How worthy are we of its glory which, surely, is a gleam of the glory of the God who is the author of liberty?

Written Work.-Write on one of the following topics:

- 1. The faith of a prophet and its foundation. Reading 88.
- 2. The new Jerusalem and the old, a contrast between the city of man and the city of God as Ezekiel saw it Perhaps there might be included a comparison of the new Jerusalem of the book of Revelation and that of Ezekiel Reading 89.

JOEL

THE question of the date of this book is dealt with in ABC, p. 768; and on the following pages are traced the various threads of thought which are interwoven in the book in a somewhat confusing way.

Reading 90: Joel 1:2-2:13

NATIONAL CALAMITY AND A CALL TO REPENTANCE

At the time in which Joel was preaching Judah was visited by a plague of locusts, the like of which not the oldest inhabitant of the land could remember (1:2-7). To the prophet this national calamity was the work of God, who was displeased with his people, and it was a warning of the coming day of final judgment on the earth

(1:15; 2:1-2).

This conviction that the spiritual condition of a nation has a direct connection with its outer circumstances is found in all the prophets. We should seriously consider it. To be sure, an increasing knowledge of what we call the laws of nature has caused our belief in direct divine action in such matters as drought or insect pests to fade. Nevertheless, this new knowledge has contributed to human ability to cope with nature, and this means responsibility for a wise use of the new power. With this responsibility the moral element comes in with new force. Many plagues are now known to be due to human toleration of filth. The dust storms of the Southwest are traced to human haste to

get rich quick by plowing up land unfitted for cultivation. Floods are often due to the greedy destruction of forests. Rich soil can be impoverished and rich acres reduced to barrenness by heedless and shiftless methods of farming.

Thus, while a modern prophet would not promise a people smitten by plague or impoverished by drought that they would find immediate relief if they came to God in repentant prayer, still he would have a message for them. He would bid them examine themselves to see whether they had practiced self-restraint, whether they had obeyed the laws of hygiene, whether they had treated the good earth with the respect due to the gift of God rather than with the ruthlessness with which conquered territory is looted of its last atom of wealth. Greed and the folly which it brings account for many of the calamities which we blame on nature. Here, as elsewhere, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

In Joel's eyes the crowning disaster was the impossibility of offering the regular sacrifices in the Temple (1:9, 13, 16). The acts of worship by which the people of Judah regularly approached their God could not be kept up because of the extreme poverty of the stricken land. Access to God was Israel's great inheritance, and now that was being cut off. Of course, as v. 13 shows, Joel was well aware that sacrifices were not the indispensable means of coming before God. But he knew that established ways of worship, with their impressive symbolism, were of tremendous value. The starvation of religious services which robs them of their beauty and dignity is a threat to the life of the spirit, just as a lean harvest is a threat to the welfare of the body.

The final element in this *Reading* is the demand for a repentance which is no mere solemn form but a matter of a real change of heart (2:12-13). V. 13 is perhaps the finest single verse in the book. On the one hand is the vivid figure of speech, "rend your heart, and not your garments," which fixes itself in the memory with irresistible force. On the

other is the tender beauty with which the mercy of God is affirmed.

We may well ponder over the way in which his prophetic awareness of God led Joel to interpret this dire visitation on the farms and vineyards of his little country. Surely he has a message for us, bidding us remember that no situation is seen in its true meaning unless it is surveyed from the steps of the throne of the Eternal.

Reading 91: Joel 2:15-32

THE DAY OF THE LORD BRINGS INSPIRATION TO HIS PEOPLE

This passage begins with a call for a great national act of contrition in which all the people of every age and class are to take part (vv. 15-27). Then comes an assurance of the restoration of the divine favor to be expressed in a return of the days of lavish prosperity. But Joel would not have been a true prophet if he had been content to think of the final act of God's mercy as simply a gift of material prosperity. No, the great age of Israel will come when the prayer of Moses (Num. 11:29) is answered and all God's

people become prophets.

Vv. 28-31 are the most familiar verses in the book because they were quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost. Peter saw the prophecy of Joel fulfilled in the rapturous experience of the divine indwelling which had come to the disciples of Christ as they were gathered in the upper room. In the days and years that followed, this experience came to multitudes as the Christian movement spread over the world. These Christians dreamed dreams, they saw visions, and in an inspired enthusiasm they made their dreams come true as they turned the world upside down. This is indeed the great sign of God's real coming to his people, and in that sign they always conquer.

We are living in the age of the Spirit. That we must believe if we do not admit that ours are degenerate days in which the vision of the fathers has been lost by their chil-

dren. But we must show our faith by our works. The outward marks of the Pentecostal experience can be fairly easily reproduced so far as noisy expressions of emotional enthusiasm are concerned. These are things that can be worked up. But dreams and visions in which the unseen realities of God are seen so clearly that the dreamers and visionaries are enabled to live lives of exalted beauty and goodness are not to be conjured up by human effort. They are the gifts of God to those who truly and earnestly repent of their sins and wait before God in expectant faith for the outpouring of his Spirit.

XI JONAH

THE question of whether the story of Jonah should be taken as literal truth is discussed in ABC, pp. 788-89. It is a great pity that the quite useless argument over this has led to an almost complete neglect of the message of the book. A. S. Peake says of it that "the author stands beyond question among the greatest of the prophets by the side of Jeremiah and the Second Isaiah." To many, however, the book of Jonah is only a story of a man swallowed by a fish and disgorged, still alive, after three days and three nights. In our reading let us center our attention on the meaning which the prophetic author was seeking to convey by his story.

Reading 92: Jonah 1

A SMALL MAN AND A GREAT GOD

Jonah was proud of his God (v. 9). He was not a heathen but a Hebrew, a member of the race to which the true God, the only God, had been pleased to reveal himself. Furthermore, God was real to him, so real that he heard God's call to preach a message of warning to the heathen. He heard the call, but he did not obey it. Instead he set off for Tarshish, at the other end of the world: and, having gone on board his ship, he dismissed the whole matter, and that so successfully that he would have slept through a storm which terrified even the veteran seamen, had they not aroused him.

How could Jonah do it? How could he be so inconsistent as to try to run away from "the Lord, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry land"? How could he do so with complete blindness to the wickedness and folly of his action? The heathen sailors were shocked at the thing that he had done, but it took the storm and the tell-tale casting of the lots to bring home to Jonah the stupidity and the sin of what he was doing.

Well, before we dismiss Jonah as an altogether impossible character, let us consider the many Christians who do not believe in foreign missions. Let us recall the pitiful amount which is given even by those who do believe in foreign missions enough to contribute at all. Let us look at the way in which Christian young people put the ministry at the very bottom of their list of possible careers. Let us think of the widespread popularity of isolation as the policy of Christian America. Then see how complacent we have been, even in the midst of a world storm. But always we pride ourselves on being a nation with a Christian civilization, far above the benighted heathen.

People with small minds can think of a great God; but they cannot think largely enough, and they cannot live up to him.

Reading 93: Jonah 3-4

A TOO MERCIFUL GOD

The author of the book of Jonah emphasizes the extent of Nineveh, but Jonah himself thought less of the size of the city than of its monstrous wickedness. How her lesser neighbors thought of Assyria we have seen from our reading of the book of Nahum. Assyria was the great brutal tyrant-nation, and in her capital city were summed up all the things which made her hated. Jonah was willing—nay more, he was anxious—to see the total destruction of the great city. He sat on his hillside in gloating expectation. There was only one thing which gave him pause: the

wideness in God's mercy. It would be just like God to pardon these wretches merely because they had repented.

So it turned out. Jonah was bitterly angry (4:1-3). Still he hoped for the worst for Nineveh; and, shaded by a providentially provided vine, he sat on the hilltop grimly waiting for fire to be rained down upon his enemies. Then the vine withered, the good Jonah was parched by the sun, and his cry over the destruction of his shelter went up to heaven. The story ends with the divine rebuke of a man who could look forward with enjoyment to the destruction of a vast population which included a hundred twenty thousand infants, while he mourned loudly over the loss of a little gourd.

Here are two oddities of human nature. One is the self-ishness which makes his own convenience more important to a man than the very existence of whole populations of people whom he does not know. During the second World War the newspapers carried stories of Americans demanding more meat and protesting at the idea of shipping food to Europe where millions of children faced all the ills of extreme undernourishment. As a people we spend more for cosmetics than for the mission work of all our churches. There is something wrong here, and the wrong is deep and deadly. Our sheltering gourd is more precious in our sight than all the people of Nineveh.

The other monstrous flaw in human nature which Jonah exemplified is the dreadful capacity for hatred which makes us resent the idea that our enemies are really human and are entitled to any place at all in the divine favor. In theory we believe that all men are created by God But in practice we vigorously resent the idea. Jews and Negroes are somehow not as human as we are. The Japanese are yellow monkeys. Somehow God is overstepping the proper bounds

when he treats such people with love and mercy.

Jonah makes a very sorry figure. Perhaps we Christians ought to look at him more closely than we do.

Written Work.-Write on one of the following topics:

- 1. The age of the Spirit. Can we have our Pentecost? Reading 91.
- 2. The story of Jonah and the missionary program of the Christian Church. Readings 92-93.

XII

OBADIAH

THE book of Obadiah is the shortest book in the O.T., and it is certainly among the least inspiring parts of the Bible. It has been called a hymn of hate. This is too severe a judgment, but it is true that it is principally an expression of the bitter resentment which the Jewish nation felt toward the Edomites, who had played the part of a jackal to the Babylonian lion. Other expressions of this feeling are found in Ezek. 35; Lam. 4:21-22; Psa. 137-7.

Reading 94: Obadiah A MINOR PROPHET

Short as the book is, it falls into several distinct sections. As the notes in *ABC*, p. 785, indicate, these sections may come from different authors. If so, they were put together by a skillful hand, for the various parts fit each other very well.

The first section, vv. 1-9, denounces the pride of the Edomites, who feel secure in their mountain strongholds. Obadiah reminds them that no fortress is secure for those who have merited the judgment of Jehovah. We have met with this idea more than once in our reading of the prophets. Here it is expressed with power and beauty. Notice v. 4. Nations learn this truth only slowly, if, indeed, they learn it at all. We ourselves have been repeatedly urged to seek security for America in great armaments. There is always the danger that trust in earthly power will

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lead to a self-confidence in which God is forgotten. The Hebrew prophets well knew that for nations, as for individuals, pride goeth before a fall.

In the second section, vv. 10-14, the baseness of Edom's treatment of her sister nation is described and attacked. We Americans have seen Hungary and Poland taking advantage of Czechoslovakia's helplessness under the hand of Hitler to rob her. The baseness of such conduct is equaled by its folly. Obadiah's God was the protector of Israel, and to betray her was to flout him.

Finally, in vv. 15-21, is the message of hope for dispossessed and exiled Israel. The day of the Lord is at hand, a day of judgment, when the world will be ruled in right-eousness and Israel will be restored, to the confusion of Edom. Obadiah is a minor prophet, it is true, but even the least of the prophets looked beyond time to eternity, beyond man to God.

Think of the grandeur of a body of literature of which even the least important piece bears a message as well worth study as that of this little book, the book of a minor prophet.

XIII

HAGGAI

HAGGAI was concerned with hastening the rebuilding of the Temple at Jerusalem. All through the years of Babylonian rule it had lain in the ruins to which Nebuchadnezzar's demolition squads had reduced it. Now Israel was free again to practice her religion as she pleased, but still the Temple remained a ruin. To Haggai this was an intolerable neglect of duty, and he set himself to arouse his people from their shameful insensibility to the demands of their religion.

Reading 95: Haggai 1:1-11; 2:1-9 GOD'S WORK AND GOD'S RESOURCES

First of all the prophet points out the shortsightedness of a people so absorbed in looking out for their own comfort and in greed for wealth that the care of the Lord's house is altogether neglected (1:1-11). People who lavish every care on themselves and are quite content with a shabby and tumble-down church are often among those who in their nervous haste to lay up treasures on earth miss even those lesser goods. Recall Prov. 11:24:

There is that scattereth, and increaseth yet more; And there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth only to want.

Well-built and beautiful churches are not the greatest element in religion. Nevertheless, the inward grace of a loyal

THE PROPHETS

devotion to the kingdom of God finds one of its expressions and a means of its growth in a due care for the house which is the visible symbol of the presence of the unseen God.

In 2:1-9 the prophet is addressing the people who have responded to his appeal and are at work on the new Temple. Apparently they have become discouraged by the unfavorable comparison which they cannot help making between this second Temple and the magnificence of Solomon's great building (v. 2). But the prophet meets this with the declaration that what they are building is the house of the God of all the earth, who will crown their work by his own measureless wealth and glory (vv. 4-9). The people are to do their best; and, if they do, then the house they build will be in all reality the dwelling place of the God of the whole world, whose presence will make it supremely glorious.

This prediction was literally fulfilled. The Temple which Jesus knew was more splendid than Solomon's, and had a world-wide renown and influence that the former house had never had. Zerubbabel and his fellow workers were making a great contribution to the work of establishing the religion of Jehovah and preparing it to become the religion of mankind. Haggai's prophetic vision made him see the greatness of an enterprise which to most of his countrymen was a

rather pitiful undertaking.

How clearly do we see the importance of the part assigned to us in the great work of God?

XIV

ZECHARIAH

THIS book falls into two divisions. Chs. 1-8 are from a contemporary of Haggai and express a like interest in the rebuilding of the Temple. Chs. 9-14 have nothing to say about this undertaking, and seem to refer to conditions existing in Palestine under the Greek kings who ruled in Asia Minor as successors of Alexander the Great in that part of his empire. It is evident that they are not the work of the Zechariah who wrote chs. 1-8. See ABC, pp. 825f.

Reading 96: Zechariah 4 THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

The allegorical vision and the angelic interpreter are characteristic of Zechariah (cf. 1:7-11, 18-21; 2:1-5; 3:1-5; 5:1-11, etc.). Here is a great reservoir feeding the flame of seven lamps, which stand for the constant watchfulness of Jehovah which gives light to all the world (vv. 2-3, 10b). On each side of the great lamps is an olive tree, standing for the two human representatives of God on earth in this case, no doubt, Zerubbabel and Joshua the priest. The vision with its explanation is in vv. 1-6a, 10b-11, 13-14. V. 10b should follow immediately after 6a, thus. "Then he answered and spake unto me, saying, . . . These are the eyes of the Lord."

In 6b-10a is an application to the work which Zerubbabel was doing of the idea of Jehovah's watchful care. As we now have it, it appears as an insertion interrupting the course

of Zechariah's description of his vision. This awkward placing of the prophet's fine exhortation is due to the clumsiness of some scribe. Zerubbabel is reminded that the power upon which he must rely is the unseen but real presence of Jehovah, who works not with the noise and display with which human beings bring about their ends but with the invisible but irresistible power of his Spirit moving in the hearts of men. This is another of the many prophetic declarations of the infinite superiority of the power of the Spirit to all the powers of men. V. 10 foretells the glorious end of the undertaking which at the time looked so insignificant. The work is God's, and the day of small things is the eve of greatness for those who open their hearts to his Spirit. The Bible is filled with instances of men who, working with God, builded better than they knew; and Christian history is a record of the victories of faith which far outdo in reality the wildest dreams of men.

Reading 97: Zechariah 8

THE CITY OF GOD AND MEN

This chapter is Zechariah's picture of Jerusalem as it will be when the Lord takes up his residence in the restored Temple. It is a beautiful passage which repays careful

reading.

The prophet begins by an assertion of Jehovah's deep concern for the welfare of Jerusalem (v. 2). He then goes on to emphasize the idyllic happiness of life in the city when, blessed with the presence of the Lord, it becomes the city of truth. The turmoil of civil strife and foreign wars which has endured so long will be unknown (v. 10). Old age will be secure despite its feebleness, and children will play in the open streets in carefree safety (vv. 3-5). Peace and joy come when truth is the goal of a city's life.

But the people to whom he speaks cannot believe that Jerusalem will ever be a city like that. It is a beautiful dream, but it is a dream that can never come true. Most of

ZECHARIAH

Zion's people are in exile, and those who do dwell in Jerusalem are poor and fearful for the future. Zechariah meets this faintheartedness with the grand assertion that what is marvelous to them is easily possible to the Lord (vv. 6-8). Then let them turn to God in faith, putting themselves at his service for the rebuilding of his house, and new strength will come to them with the dawning of the new day in which Jerusalem will be in truth the city of God (vv. 9-13). This is God's purpose, and to his purpose he is always

This is God's purpose, and to his purpose he is always true (vv. 14-15). But the people must do their part, and that means a dedication to a type of living worthy of their God (vv. 16-17). The city of truth must be a city of righteous men. Jehovah cannot dwell amid evildoers. But to those who love truth and peace, the old days of fasting and mourning will become joyous holidays (vv. 18-19).

Finally the prophet speaks of Jerusalem's place among the nations. The city of truth draws her neighbors to the worship of Jchovah. They see her good works and glorify her God (cf. Mt. 5:16). Far and wide the fame of her blessedness will spread, a blessedness which is due to the favor of the God who dwells in her. From every nation men will seek the leadership of her people, saying, "We have heard that God is with you" (v. 23b).

It is a glorious picture. This is the city of God and of God's men. God will dwell in it, but men must build it for him and in his strength. Zechariah is calling his people to a great adventure, and we can call our own America to the same great undertaking. "Fear not, but let your hands be strong" (v. 13) is God's word to the builders of his city.

Reading 98: Zechariah 9

PEACE AND WAR

In this chapter there are two strands. One represents the idea found so often in the prophets, the idea of the destruction of the heathen as a prelude to the exaltation of Israel. The other is the picture of the Messianic king bring-

ing world peace, to which reference is made in Matthew's story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. The contrast is striking, and it has a message for us.

Vv. 1-8 tell of the destruction of the cities of the Palestinian coast lands, from Tyre in the north to the Philistine towns in the south. As a result the once hated and feared Philistines are to become part of the Jewish nation—not, however, by conquest, but by conversion—and Judah's frontiers will be secure at last (vv. 7-8). Vv. 11-17 predict the triumph of Israel in battle against the Greeks. It is to be made complete by the act of Jehovah, who will save his people and make them the destroyers of their enemies.

In strong contrast is the description of the true king of Israel in vv. 9 and 10. He comes armed only with justice, in a gentle humility which links him in understanding sympathy with the lowliest of his people. Under his rule Israel will put away her arms, for he will bring peace to the world by the conquering power of a justice which none can doubt. His is a world-wide dominion, accepted gladly by all men because in him they find the realization of their dream of a peace which comes with the assurance of justice.

At first thought we are repelled by the dark picture of the destruction of the heathen and the armed triumph of Israel. But the basic element in all these grim prophecies is the conviction that the cause of God's kingdom will rule in the world, and that those who oppose it will perish. Perhaps Israel of old was too willing to see herself as the champion of God and her enemies as his enemies. But are we ourselves free from the same tendency? The late war brought about the destruction of Germany and the capitulation of Japan, and therein we were able to see a divine judgment. But in the bitter suffering which came to us, was there not also a visitation for the sins of our betrayal of world peace and our long toleration of the abominations of fascism and naziism? Lincoln's second inaugural address, with its solemn quotation from Psa. 19:9 (A.V.), "the judg-

ZECHARIAH

ments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether," struck the prophetic note for America. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

We hail the beautiful picture of a king of peace. Well, what are we doing to receive him? He came at last nineteen hundred years ago. That is our faith as Christians. What are we doing to make his dominion extend in peace and justice to the ends of the earth?

XV

MALACHI

THE book of Malachi is concerned principally with the proper observance of the services of the restored Temple. It was evidently written at a time when these services were being carried on without much heartfelt devotion on the part of either priests or people. The prophet was trying to bring about a revival of reverent appreciation of the value of the house of God and its ritual. See ABC, pp. 832-33.

Reading 99: Malachi 2:1-9

THE TRUE PRIEST

In Jerusalem, as it was rebuilt after the Exile, the place of the priest was more important than it had ever been in the days of the kings. The leaders of the restoration were from among the exiles in Babylon, and their aim was the creation of a religious community. Consequently, the life of the new Jerusalem was centered around the Temple and its services as the life of the old city never had been. This explains the emphasis which Malachi put upon the priest-hood.

Notice his unsparing denunciation of priestly laxity (2:1-3, 8-9; see also 1:6). But the important thing about this passage is the prophetic description of the true priest (2:5-7). Malachi is not concerned primarily with the priest as ministering at the altar in the proper conduct of the Temple ritual. His interest is in the personal character of the priest and in his work as a teacher and preacher. It

might be said that his is the Protestant idea of the priestly office as a matter not merely of conducting the symbolic ritual but of bringing men to God by opening their eyes to the truth.

The true priest is a man who lives in and by a real experience of fellowship with God, with whom he walks in humble reverence, finding in his relation to his divine Master the source of an abounding power for noble living and a deep inner peace (v. 5). This experience of God inspires a zealous and successful effort to bring to the people a saving knowledge of the truth, for the true priest is conscious of his privilege and responsibility as a messenger of Jehovah (vv. 6-7). The great crime of the priests, in Malachi's eyes, was their failure to lead their people in the way marked out for them by the divinely revealed Law, and this failure was due to their own lack of devotion which earned for them the contempt of those to whom they should have furnished worthy leadership (vv. 8-9).

High character rooted in a reverent and vital faith in

High character rooted in a reverent and vital faith in God, devotion to the preaching of the truth which makes men free, patient and loving teaching of the God-given way of life which is life indeed—these are still, as they were in the days of Malachi, the marks of the good minister. For only such a man can discharge the priestly office of bringing together the God of love and righteousness and the people whom he fain would make his children.

Reading 100: Malachi 3

THE DAY OF THE LORD'S COMING

We may read vv. 1-6 as the introductory section of this chapter. The day will come when they who wait upon the Lord in the regular services of the Temple will actually see him suddenly appearing before them. A new and glorious reality will come to priests and people as they minister before him. Those who engage in and profit by the evils of the day, the personal and social immoralities which are

as sadly prevalent in every modern city as they were in ancient Jerusalem, will find in the day of the Lord's coming a

day of judgment.

The trouble with many of Malachi's hearers is the un reality of their religion. God is not real to them. They would think twice before trying to withhold their taxes from their earthly king, but they do not hesitate to hold back from God the tithe which is his due. Then they are surprised to find that they are not prospering. Once they bring their practice into line with their profession, they will find that true godliness has indeed the promise of the life that now is (vv. 7-12).

We should note that for the Jews of old the tithe was not something they gave to God. It was something they paid him, which was just as much his due as the rent a tenant pays is the property of his landlord. It was paid to God's priests as a provision for the upkeep of the Temple and its services. To withhold it was not simply stinginess it was downright robbery. Malachi would have been horrified at the idea that once a man had paid his tithe he had no need to make any further offering to God. Much modern teaching about tithing is beneath the level even of Jewish legalism. The regular giving of a stated proportion of one's income to God as a kind of token of the stewardship of all wealth is, to be sure, the least a Christian can do. But it is rather less than Christian to regard ten per cent as all that is owed to the God who so loved the world that he gave his Son. Malachi's message for us, as for the men of his own time. is a demand for reality in our financial dealings with the organized institutions of religion. Many modern Protestants habitually give to God and his church less than they tip a waiter in a restaurant. How can such people abide the flaming reality of the Lord's coming? What would they do if he appeared at one of their services of worship?

Another prevalent insult to God was the peevish demand that he act as human impatience would have him act, re-

MALACHI

warding at once all those who obeyed his laws, and immeditely destroying those who neglected them (vv. 13-15). It is not the truly devout, who really know God, who indulge in the kind of silly and ungrateful complaints of which Malachi spoke. What would these people, with their exaggerated idea of their own merit, have to say if they were confronted with the presence of God in the day of his coming?

But there are those who can abide the day of his coming. The saving remnant of those who walk in humble joy with their God, who sing the Twenty-third Psalm with a deep and loving understanding, who speak often to one another in a happy sharing of the richest experience of life—these are the Lord's peculiar treasure (vv. 16-18). These are the people to whom the coming of the Lord will mean the joy of meeting face to face the Master whom, not having seen, they have long and deeply known and loved.

Written Work.-Write on one of the following topics:

- 1. Workers with God and what they build. Readings 95-97.
 - 2. God's judgment and God's grace. Reading 98.
 - 3. The character of the true priest. Reading 99.









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